

**NEVADA STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL (N.S.R.C.)  
MEETING MINUTES**

Tuesday, February 04, 2025, at 1:00 pm  
Vocational Rehabilitation  
1325 Corporate Blvd., Reno, NV 89502  
&  
Vocational Rehabilitation  
3016 West Charleston Blvd., Suite 200, Las Vegas, NV 89102

**COUNCILMEMBERS' PRESENT:**

Raquel O'Neill  
Sandra Sinicrope  
Jennifer Kane  
Judy Swain  
Jack Mayes  
Jenny Casselman  
Dawn Lyons  
Dr. Rebecca Rogers  
Drazen Elez, VR Administrator – Non-Voting

**COUNCILMEMBERS ABSENT:**

Robin Kincaid  
Cyndy Gustafson

**GUESTS/PUBLIC:**

Candace Walsh, Market Decisions Research  
Davis Thornton, Market Decisions Research  
Tyler Curry  
Vince Marshall  
Kate Osti  
Doralee Martinez

**STAFF:**

Todd Weiss, Deputy Attorney General  
Mechelle Merrill, VR Deputy Administrator of Programs  
Brett Martinez, VR Deputy Administrator of Operations  
Jenny Richter Livia, N.S.R.C. Liaison  
Trina Bourke, VR Southern District Manager  
Mat Dorangricchia, VR Northern District Manager  
Marshal Hernandez, VR District Manager  
Sheena Childers, Bureau Chief  
Ken Pierson, Business Services Manager

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Jason Birmingham, Business Enterprise Officer  
Mary Zeniou, Program Officer III  
Cynthia Pate, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor  
Brian Adragna, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor  
Jacqueline Quintero, Administrative Assistant III

DRAFT

**1. CALL TO ORDER, INTRODUCTIONS, AND VERIFY TIMELY POSTING OF AGENDA**

Raquel O'Neill, NSRC Chair, called the meeting to order at 1:02 pm. Jenny Richter Livia, N.S.R.C. Liaison, called the role.

Ms. Richter determined a quorum was present and verified the posting was completed on time and in accordance with Open Meeting Law.

**2. FIRST PUBLIC COMMENT**

Chair O'Neill opened the floor to public comments. Legal notice read and phone number provided for Public Comments.

No public comments at North or South locations or online attendees, advancing to the next agenda item.

**3. APPROVAL OF THE NOVEMBER 12, 2024, MEETING MINUTES**

Chair O'Neill asked the council for any clarifications or corrections to the November 12, 2024, N.S.R.C Meeting Minutes. There were no comments.

Chair O'Neill asked for a motion. Jenny Casselman, N.S.R.C. Council Member, made a motion to approve the minutes as presented. Jack Mayes, Vice-Chair, seconds the motion. All in favor, none opposed, none abstained, motion carried.

**4. DISCUSSION OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION (VR) SUCCESS STORIES**

Chair O'Neill opened the floor to Mechelle Merrill, VR Deputy Administrator of Programs, to share the quarterly success stories.

Ms. Merrill thanked Chair O'Neill and VR staff and their clients for participating. She turned to Cynthia Pate, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, for the first story.

Ms. Pate introduced Tyler Curry, VR client and member of the public in attendance, who VR has assisted with job placement and maintaining employment.

Mr. Curry relayed his story in his own words. He was in a car accident in 2017, which left him as a C6 (functioning) quadriplegic. Prior to that, he was an industrial plumbing salesman, which he enjoyed. After his accident, Mr. Curry tried to get back to work in his chosen sector, but found it to be difficult, in addition to noticing some discrimination because of his new disability. He decided that it was time to make a change and reached out to VR, where he connected with Ms. Pate. He was very grateful for her assistance.

Ms. Pate helped him develop his resume and seek out work in the private sector, although ultimately, he found a job with the State of Nevada at the Department of Health and Human Services, where he works as an Administrative Assistant III with Aging and Disability Services. Mr. Curry has found the work to be challenging, but in a good way, and expressed his desire to pursue a master's degree in public

administration. He is currently enrolled in online classes with the University of Montana. Mr. Curry expressed his gratitude that he has the opportunity, and that it keeps him busy outside of working hours.

Ms. Merrill thanked Mr. Curry for sharing his story. She turned the floor over to Counselor Michael Adragna for the second Success Story.

Brian Adragna introduced Vince Marshall, a former client of his and successfully rehabilitated. Brian assisted him with finding, gaining, and maintaining employment.

Mr. Marshall relayed his story to the council. He is a former diesel mechanic and drivetrain technician, which he did for twenty-six years. Mr. Marshall said that this job was very hard on his body and especially his knees, for which he later had surgery. He found that he was no longer able to do the same kind of work, desiring instead to pursue a job with a CDL (Commercial Driver's License). Mr. Marshall said that, given his background in working with diesel trucks and engines, so he was able to obtain his Class C and Class A licenses through the VR program. One of the things he appreciated most was that he didn't have to pay any of the out-of-pocket expenses for training, travel, and equipment that he required during this process. Mr. Marshall regards the assistance he has received from VR as a blessing. He is still doing work in his new field. He enjoys his job very much, quoting "If you love what you do, you never work a day in your life."

Ms. Merrill thanked Mr. Marshall for sharing his story. She also wished to extend thanks to our counselors for their efforts and everything that they do for our clients.

Chair O'Neill stated that she always appreciates hearing the Success Stories that we have. Chair O'Neill gave a reminder that the Council has a seat that exists for former clients of VR. Although it is currently filled, she wished for clients to keep it in mind in the future.

Vice-Chair Mayes thanked Mr. Curry and Mr. Marshall for their time and sharing their stories with the Council. He stated that it's always good to hear directly from clients how the program is working and further wished to congratulate them both on their successes. He wished them good luck and stated that he was looking forward to seeing where their promising endeavors lead them.

Member Casselman wished to echo Chair O'Neill's and Vice-Chair Mayes' sentiments. She said that it is also very wonderful to hear Success Stories, both publicly and privately and see the contributions being made to the community by the VR program.

Chair O'Neill asked if any other members of the council had comments. There were no further comments. Ms. O'Neill once again thanked the clients and counselors for sharing and announced a move forward to the next agenda item.

## **5. RESULTS OF THE FFY2024 CONSUMER SATISFACTION SURVEY**

Chair O'Neill opened the floor to Candace Walsh and Davis Thornton of Market Decisions Research, to present the results of the FFY2024 Consumer Satisfaction Survey.

Mr. Thornton introduced himself, a research analyst at Market Decisions Research, primarily focused on Vocational Rehabilitation-related projects. He started discussing the highlights of the Nevada Vocational Rehabilitation Consumer Experience Survey, as well as the core elements of the survey.

Mr. Thornton began with "Methods", listing the total number of clients surveyed. 1,069 General VR Consumers, 359 Youth Transition Consumers, and 50 Older Individuals who are Blind Consumers, for a total of 1,478 consumers surveyed. The data was further stratified by case benchmarks indicated by the Nevada (NV) VR/Older Individual Blind (OIB) Program. IPE to 6 months in service: 553. In service 6 to 12 months: 115. In service 18+ months: 520. Closed cases: 290.

Mr. Thornton moved on to discussing the core metrics used for the broad measures of the VR consumer experience, of which Nevada has 11, split into 6 Domains (summaries of responses to multiple questions), and 5 key questions. The domains are measured on a common scale of 0 to 100. Each metric is the average of all scores for those questions. The domains are as follows: Overall Satisfaction and Expectations, Experience with Services Provided by VR, Experience with Staff and Counselors, Communications with VR Staff, Consumer Control and Involvement, and Outcomes and Meeting Goals. Key questions are as follows: Ease of the application process, accessibility of VR/OIB office for someone with your type of disability, satisfaction with current employment, likelihood that you would recommend Nevada VR/OIB services to friends with disabilities, and did you experience any problems with the program or services provided.

Mr. Thornton explained a breakdown of the core metrics by percentages. Overall, these metrics were positive, ranging from a low of 71 (satisfaction with current employment) to a high of 87 (accessibility of the VR office for someone with your type of disability, although this number dropped to 68 with asking OIB clients specifically.) The highest rated category among all client groups surveyed was the Experience with Staff and Counselors, ranging from 84 to 89 on the satisfaction scale. 91% of clients surveyed were likely to recommend the VR program to others with disabilities, and an average of 70% of all clients had no problems with VR or the services provided (although this dropped to 59% for OIB clients, despite them

also having the highest likelihood of recommending the program to others with visual impairments at 95%.)

Summary of the metrics collected by Market Decisions Research showed generally that consumers continue to be satisfied with the services provided, although VR consumers rated their experience lower across core metrics compared to Youth in Transition and Older Individuals who are Blind clients. That said, five of the metrics have increased 4+ points since 2024 Trimester 2, but satisfaction with employment has been decreasing steadily since 2022 Trimester 2.

Mr. Thornton relayed that the trends to watch included the increasing percentage of clients reporting no problems with VR services, the inconsistent percentage of clients reporting satisfaction with employment, and the stabilization of “likelihood of recommendation for the VR program” at a high of 90% for 2024 Trimester 3. Nonetheless, while scores overall remain positive, the areas with the most room for improvement are Experience with Services Provided (73/100), Overall Satisfaction and Expectations (74/100), and Communications with Staff (74/100).

Consumers with at least 18 months in service tend to be more positive about: Accessibility of the office, ease of application for services, experience with staff and counselors, and customer control and involvement. Conversely, this group reported feeling more challenged by services than the others did, indicating that additional support may be needed in these areas.

Mr. Thornton displayed that trends across metrics for the VR program showed a decline in satisfaction between Trimester 1 and Trimester 2 of 2024, before increasing again in Trimester 3 of 2024. No metric listed showed a decrease in satisfaction when comparing the end of year to the start of the year.

Noting general consumer feedback on problems with the agency or services provided, 41% of those experiencing a problem indicate that VR worked to resolve the issue. Problems tend to be centered around communication with counselors and perceived time lags to get into the program. Out of 293 clients who reported issues, the top response (at 15%) was the complaint that counselors did not return calls, emails, or follow up. 14% said that they received no help in reaching plan goals. 13% said that their counselor was not helpful or supportive. 11% each had issues with the length of time in process to receive services, not enough contact or support, and not achieving their goal via services received.

General VR Consumer Feedback listed, out of 628 survey respondents, the following issues were the most common: Better communication needed (31%), slow/long process (25%), more contact needed (24%), need more information about services (19%), counselors not returning communications or following up

(19%), lack of help in reaching goals (18%), and needing more help/options in job search (17%).

Mr. Thornton further added that 52% of General VR consumers are currently employed. This is split between full-time and part-time workers, with full-time workers being a larger portion of that 52% (28% vs 24%). Among those dissatisfied with their jobs, 23% wished for more job options or higher wages, while 10% each disliked certain aspects of their job or saw their current employment as a temporary measure. 68% of employed clients surveyed were happy with their current employment, with 79% among closed cases, 74% among those with six to twelve months in service, and 54% among those with eighteen or more months in service respectively.

Mr. Thornton continued on to list the trends to watch with Youth in Transition Consumers. These clients, out of the three groups surveyed, generally expressed the highest overall positivity about their experience with VR services. Among these clients, ease of application for services and satisfaction with current employment domains have been trending upwards throughout the year. In fact, the lowest satisfaction levels among this group are on average only 76 of 100, which is still very good. That being said, experience with staff and counselors, as well as ease of office accessibility, declined from the low-mid 90s to the mid-80s in satisfaction levels. Likewise, the percentage of those who experienced no issues with services declined from a high of 84% in Trimester 1, to 68% in Trimester 2, before rising slightly to 70% in Trimester 3. Other metrics fluctuated up or down more moderately throughout the year, with most seeing a slight decrease in satisfaction.

Next, and of note, almost all of those receiving special targeted youth in transition services found the services received to be valuable, with 94% or greater approval across the five services listed. The percentage of youth in transition consumers receiving these special services ranged from a low of 50% to a high of 61%.

Among the youth in transition clients that experienced a problem during their time in service, Mr. Thornton noted that 33% found that VR worked to resolve the problem. The group who experienced the most problems were the youth in transition clients with six to twelve months in service (68% no problems) versus closed cases (87% no problems). Those with up to six months in service and eighteen or more months were 79% and 69% no problems respectively.

Seventy-eight youth in transition (YIT) clients were surveyed about the types of problems experienced during their time receiving services. Counselors/staff not returning calls, emails, etc./difficulty getting in touch, or not being helpful/supportive accounted for 41% (combined) and 15% of the problems this group experienced. 14% each for lack of help in reaching goals and needing better communication, 12% counselors dismissing concerns, and 9% said that they were



not being listened to or understood by staff. Furthermore, consumers were asked to provide additional feedback when they were not positive in their assessment of the services received. Feedback was collected from a 21-question survey, in which clients could provide multiple responses to a question.

The most common responses among the 198 consumers who participated in the survey were as follows:

Difficulties communicating with or getting in touch with staff (58%), difficulty in obtaining services, or needing additional support (27%), problems with paperwork, forms, or requiring assistance in completing forms (26%), had to wait/were waiting to receive services or had not yet received them (25%), did not receive enough information about programs and services (20%), VR program was ineffective in helping client meet goals (17%), needed additional help finding work (15%).

Next, Mr. Thornton moved to the Consumer Experience for details on Older Individuals that are Blind (OIB) clients. As stated previously, this group's experience was not overall as positive as the other two, although it is more positive than in previous years. The highest rated aspect was the experience working with the OIB staff, at a satisfaction level of 89, which is comparable to 2023. Other positive areas include outcomes and meeting of goals, as well as those who would recommend services to others (this increased from 84% in 2023 to the previously mentioned 95% for 2024.) Obtaining needed equipment, gaining independence, and having a good support system were also aspects of receiving services that OIB clients rated highly.

Aspects of the consumer experience that were rated lower by OIB consumers included: ease of application, accessibility of the offices, and communication issues with staff, specifically a need for more thorough and timely communication. This was noted as a challenge throughout the OIB experience. On another note, locations, travel distances, and transportation to and from offices were felt to be barriers to accessing services. Consumers expressed a desire for flexible options in meeting locations.

Core Metrics for OIB were shown to have generally improved throughout the year (in some cases drastically so, including overall satisfaction increasing by 25% by year's end, outcomes and meeting goals increasing by 22%, ease of application increasing by 47%, satisfaction with current employment reaching 100%, and those without problems while receiving services increasing by 25% as well.) Unfortunately, accessibility of the VR offices for OIB clients decreased from 76 to 58 in score during the same period. This is the only metric trend where numbers went down compared to the start of the year. Something to note, however, is that surveys conducted in Trimester 1 may have had as few as 6 respondents, and this



number increased during later trimesters, which likely balanced out the data to a greater degree.

Mr. Thornton reiterated that 59% of OIB clients surveyed reported no problems with VR services. Of those who reported problems, only 9% felt that Nevada VR worked to resolve the problem. The group with the lowest reported number of problems in service were those within the first six months post-IPE (85% no problems), whereas with those with six to twelve months in service, only 24% reported no issues. Those in service for 18 or more months and those with closed cases reported 67% and 60% no problems respectively.

Eighteen clients were surveyed. As with other groups, communication problems ranked as the most common issue, with a combined 40% reporting an occurrence. 20% reported not receiving needed assistive technology. 14% reported receiving insufficient support, 10% reported the process was taking too long, and 8% reported not achieving their goals.

Feedback from surveyed OIB clients who were not positive in their assessment of VR was collected via 21 questions, with responses received by 40 individuals. 59% reported issues with completing paperwork or forms, 51% reported communication issues, 33% needed more support or guidance, a combined 39% had issues with office locations, office hours, or accessibility of facilities. 19% had a problem with customer involvement/control over his or her VR experience. 13% each felt that the program was not effective in meeting their goals, or that agency staff was unprofessional, rude, or did not care, although these latter two complaints were notably small, even considering the relatively small survey size.

Mr. Thornton restated the findings from the Consumer Satisfaction Survey in a condensed manner, emphasizing that general VR and YIT clients in their first six months with the program seem to be more positive about their experiences.

Areas of Focus for suggested improvement were noted to be communication and contact with clients in a timely manner, offering clearer guidance and more information on services, and simplifying the application process.

Mr. Thornton presented another slide listing details shown on the previously specified client challenges/problems.

Core Areas to monitor and improve include the need for consistent service quality from staff and counselors, as well as continued changes to improve the application process. It is also important to reiterate that OIB consumers are reporting the most issues with services received. Also, with slight decreases across the board in Trimesters 2 and 3 for accessibility, it suggests that there's room for improvement in this area. The positive is that especially among General VR and YIT clients, we

see a willingness to recommend services to others. Continue monitoring this domain to see if it remains stable.

Data collection will continue to be performed in three trimesters and handled via telephone. Consumers will be invited to complete the survey online, but the telephone response rate is anticipated to continue being much higher. Email reminders to complete the survey will also be done if phone calls are unsuccessful in reaching some clients, provided that email addresses are valid and available. Consumers may request an email invitation to the online survey over the phone as well.

Mr. Thornton asked if there were any questions from the council.

Ms. Casselman, NSRC council member, first commended agency staff on the strong numbers reported in the survey and clients' willingness to share feedback. She asked if there was a year over year trend line analysis available on metrics.

Mr. Thornton responded that they do have that data on hand, but that Market Decisions Research has not charted it at this time.

Candace Walsh, Research Manager at Market Decisions Research, noted that the annual report has more trending data, but that they do not break it down year over year by trimester. They can, however, pull together annual trends going back to 2018.

Member Casselman has a follow-up question. She would like to know whether the frequency of the survey is based on any regulatory requirements or if it is simply a useful tool to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement.

Ms. Walsh explained that while the primary purpose of the survey is to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement, it also contributes to the comprehensive statewide needs assessment conducted every three years. Consumers are typically sampled once a year, unless there is a status change in their case, in which case they may be surveyed twice. This approach helps minimize respondent fatigue while ensuring that the data we receive remains reliable and accurate.

Member Kane had a question for Ms. Walsh. She stated that she would very much like to see the year over year trending data, noting that it seems as though things have improved greatly in the past decade, including ways that data collection is done.

Ms. Walsh responded that they will work on pulling that data together and they will continue to refine their survey process in order to obtain the most actionable data possible. They aim to get better and better each year.

Chair O'Neill remarked that she agrees the collaboration with MDR has significantly improved data collection over the years. However, she had a question regarding one of the slides related to OIB. Since OIB is not an employment-focused group, she inquired why data was collected on satisfaction with employment.

Ms. Walsh responded that that is not a metric usually collected for OIB. Future reports will remedy this issue.

Chair O'Neill continued, emphasizing the importance of collecting data for OIB clients, but noted that sometimes the data raises more questions than it answers. She specifically mentioned the challenges OIB clients face with the application process and stressed the need to understand why this continues to be a barrier. Additionally, she expressed concerns about facility access, wishing there was more data available on this issue.

Ms. Walsh responded that this data is available through follow-up questions asked when a client provides a negative response. The team can review some of the verbatim responses for further insight. She also reiterated that the data may be skewed due to the low response rate from OIB clients, particularly in the first trimester of the year. However, efforts are being made to increase the response rate so that the data fluctuations seen in 2024 do not recur this year. Additionally, MDR is working on making the online survey more accessible.

Chair O'Neill offered her assistance, stating that if any consultation or feedback is needed, she is available to help.

Mr. Thornton mentioned that he is adapting the Verbatim compendium that they have so that it can be filtered by program and district.

Chair O'Neill then inquired whether VR is re-engaging with schools, given the challenges encountered in reaching YIT clients during the pandemic.

Drazen Elez, VR Administrator, explained that VR is in a much better position than in the past, although challenges remain in some local schools. However, significant progress has been made in these areas compared to previous years. Mr. Elez also highlighted the key contributions of Jennifer Kane and the partnership with the Department of Education, noting the substantial strides they have made.

Chair O'Neill praised the fact that more than half of the youth in the program are gaining volunteer work experience. She also inquired whether MDR could provide additional data on the employment satisfaction metric, specifically to identify detailed reasons for dissatisfaction.

Ms. Walsh noted that across other states' VR programs, they are also seeing lower job satisfaction rates, and that this can possibly be attributed to post-pandemic

outlooks, indicating dissatisfaction with the job market generally as opposed to VR specifically.

Chair O'Neill thanked Ms. Walsh for her comments and asked if there were any further questions.

Member Sinicrope had a question about an item on page 28 of the presentation. She asked for a more detailed explanation of the "having a support system" element listed.

Ms. Walsh responded that this element comes back to the relationship between the counselor and the client as well as with staff.

Chair O'Neill thanked Ms. Walsh and Mr. Thornton once again for their presentation and announced that the meeting would now proceed to the next agenda item.

## **6. OTHER REPORTS**

Chair O'Neill opened the floor for Kate Osti to provide updates on the Client Assistance Program (CAP).

Kate Oesti, Executive Director Nevada Disability Advocacy and Law Center (NDALC) thanked the council for having her and apologized for her absence at the previous meeting. She was pleased to announce that NDALC has a new attorney on staff, and the full team of advocates is in the process of obtaining their certifications.

Ms. Oesti provided updates on the CAP program from October 2024 to the present. Notably, none of the CAP services provided during this period have escalated to a fair hearing. The continued close collaboration between the program and VR has been producing positive results. Seven clients sought CAP services to develop their IPEs, while 15 clients requested assistance with communication barriers between them and their counselors. Additionally, one client from the OIB program mistakenly submitted an application to the CAP program instead of VR.

Ms. Osti asked if there were any questions. There were none for her.

Chair O'Neill thanked Ms. Osti for her presentation and then turned the floor over to Dawn Lyons, NSRC Councilmember for updates on Nevada State Independent Living Council (NSILC)

NSRC Liaison Richter informed the council that Member Dawn Lyons had to leave the meeting to attend another engagement, but her bullet points are available in Tab 6 of the agenda in the materials folder.

Chair O'Neill highlighted these points for those in attendance and advised anyone with questions to reach out to Dawn at a later time. Concluding this segment, she moved on to the next agenda item.

**7. SUMMER YOUTH INTERNSHIP PROGRAM UPDATES 2025**

Chair O'Neill opened the floor to Mary Zeniou, Program Officer, to provide an update on the Summer Youth Internship Program (SYIP).

Ms. Zeniou expressed her gratitude for being in attendance and having the opportunity to review the data collected by the agency. She noted that while there has been positive feedback, there are also areas for improvement concerning the Youth In Transition clients.

She then opened a file containing the Pre-ETS report on the 2024 Summer Youth Internship Program (SYIP). All participants were students with disabilities between the ages of 17 and 22. A total of 107 students from 9 counties participated in 4 workshops, covering financial literacy, soft skills for the workplace, resume and cover letter writing, and parent advocacy. Forty-five students successfully completed internships with 20 different employers. Client Kristen Halbert was featured in a photo at the Vegas Pet Animal Hospital, highlighting a successful internship experience.

Target Goals for 2025: The aim is for 110 students to participate, with 75 completing internships. The program plans to expand from 9 counties to 12, increase the number of participating employers to 50, and collaborate with at least ten state and federal agencies. Significant effort has gone into strategizing and planning for SYIP, including a strategic planning week with staff in October.

Some of the strategies outlined in the action plan include: an updated employer welcome packet, a new intern welcome packet, additional training and support for VR counselors, a streamlined internship process, and a new approach for securing employers for SYIP sites (including contacting employers several months in advance). Other strategies include employer training and a new job coach orientation process to ensure coaches better understand expectations.

The Pre-ETS team has also been focused on outreach this year, meeting monthly with CCSD, working with the counselor transition team, and holding monthly meetings with Washoe and Elko counties. These meetings have generally been in person, but Zoom has been used when in-person meetings aren't feasible. The goal is to visit every county in the state this year.

Ms. Zeniou was asked again about the age range of clients (17-22), and she explained that within this range, the goal is to work with repeat clients so that by the end of the program, they are prepared for their first job. The available classes are designed to support this transition.

Member Kane stated for the record that the access to schools we've gained has largely been due to Ms. Zeniou's efforts. Ms. Zeniou has provided both Ms. Kane and Deputy Administrator Merrill with substantial data, and the impact of her and her team's work on the education side has been very positive. Ms. Zeniou will also be attending the National Technical Assistance Center on Transitions Capacity Building Institute this year, along with the rest of the team. Ms. Kane expressed confidence that things will continue to improve, with goals being met and, in many cases, exceeded.

Chair O'Neill asked if there were any other questions or comments from the council. There were none. She thanked Ms. Zeniou for her information and moved the meeting forward to the next agenda item.

**8. DISABILITY INCLUSION PARTNERSHIP PLAQUE PRESENTATIONS 2024**

Chair O'Neill then turned the floor over to Deputy Administrator Merrill, who introduced Ken Pierson, Chief of the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), to speak about the Disability Inclusion Partnership Plaques. The purpose of these plaques is to recognize employers who have hired at least five clients within a four-year period.

Mr. Pierson reported that over the past nine months, VR has awarded 11 Disability Inclusion Partnership Plaques. The district managers for both the north and south regions, along with both deputy administrators, have participated in these events to present the plaques. The process for setting up these awards typically takes about two months.

Mr. Pierson extended an invitation to the council members to attend the award ceremonies. Details about these events will be provided to Deputy Administrator Merrill, who will then share the information with the council. He noted that the program has been very successful and has positively impacted repeat business for the companies involved. Mr. Pierson also thanked Administrator Elez for initiating the program.

Ms. Merrill asked if Mr. Pierson had any upcoming awards to present.

He responded that, yes, in the coming week, an award plaque will be presented to the Starbucks roasting plant. Mr. Pierson then went on to praise Starbucks' Inclusion Academy, which VR started about nine years ago. This program is now being replicated at an organization called Tapestry by VR.



In relation to this, Member Casselman asked for thoughts on companies like Walmart ending their diversity initiatives program and whether it was expected to negatively impact clients.

Mr. Pierson stated that he did not anticipate any negative impact on disabled clients working within our programs due to these potential changes.

Ms. Merrill thanked Mr. Pierson for his insights.

Chair O'Neill asked if there were any other questions or comments for Mr. Pierson. Hearing none, the meeting moved on to the next agenda item.

**9. SUMMARY OF THE NEVADA VR'S PORTION OF THE NEVADA GOVERNOR'S EXECUTIVE LEGISLATIVE BUDGET 2025-2027**

Chair O'Neill turned the floor over to Drazen Elez, Administrator of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), to present the information on the budget for the 2025-2027 biennium.

Mr. Elez apologized for the report arriving later than expected, due to other meetings and time constraints with the legislature. However, he assured the council that he would cover the contents as thoroughly as possible and would provide a more polished version after the meeting. He also thanked the council members for attending and for their continued support in helping improve services.

Mr. Elez noted that Nevada's unemployment rate is currently 5.7%, the highest in the nation. He explained that several factors contribute to this, including an influx of people moving into the state, more individuals actively seeking work who hadn't previously, and others trying to return to the workforce. Essentially, there are more people looking for work than available jobs. He pointed out that this is an important consideration when evaluating client satisfaction, adding that our consumer satisfaction ratings are very good and would be viewed positively if we were a private sector entity.

Mr. Elez spoke about the growth of the Pre-ETS team and praised Marshal Hernandez, Statewide District Manager, and Mary Zeniou, Statewide Program Officer, for their leadership in this effort. He noted that the new positions, along with contractors, have done excellent work since joining, helping to double the number of students VR has reached. He anticipates further growth and highlighted other programs beyond SYIP that the team is involved with. He encouraged those present to reach out to Mr. Hernandez and Ms. Zeniou if they knew of any businesses interested in participating in these programs.

Mr. Elez commented on an earlier statement by Mr. Pierson regarding the Disability Inclusion Awards, expressing his satisfaction with the way the program engages employers. He emphasized that the goal is to foster a different kind of



relationship—one where businesses not only employ individuals with disabilities but also ensure their spaces are accessible to customers with disabilities. He noted that many of the companies recognized by the awards also participate in the SYIP. Mr. Elez further expressed his hope that the agency can operate beyond shifting political climates and policy changes, continuing to strengthen its relationships with businesses and communities in Nevada. He added that he hopes people with disabilities are hired for their value, not simply to meet legal requirements.

Mr. Elez presented data on the applications received by VR on a quarterly basis over the past few years, along with projections for 2025 and the following two years. He emphasized a remarkable 229% increase in applications between the first quarter of 2021 and the present. The last quarter of 2024 saw over 1,100 applications submitted, averaging nearly 400 per month. Mr. Elez noted that, combined with the limited number of counselors and growing caseloads, this surge is straining the ability to maintain regular client contact. On average, with 50 counselors, each is receiving new clients daily. Currently, the average case remains open for 645 days.

The data presented will be crucial in the upcoming budget proposal to the Governor's office and legislature, ensuring the proposed VR budget aligns with the future needs of our clients.

Mr. Elez projects a steady increase in the number of cases closed by SFY2027, although the closure rate for 2025 is expected to be lower than that of 2021-2023, with an estimated 1,311 cases closed. By the end of SFY2025, however, the number of open cases is expected to reach 4,037. This high volume of open cases, combined with large caseloads, highlights a significant challenge: approximately 40% of counselors' time is now dedicated solely to intake, a sharp increase from around 15% pre-pandemic. This shift means counselors have less time to manage the growing number of clients under their care.

Mr. Elez outlined the agency's funding structure: 78.7% of the funding comes from Federal Grants, while 21.3% is provided through the Non-Federal Match for BVR. The majority of BVR's funds are derived from grant awards, with the Section 110 grant contributing \$31,691,058 to budget accounts 3254 and 3265, which represents approximately 80% of the total combined revenue authority. (A subsequent slide offers further details on how this grant operates.) Additionally, the Supported Employment Services grant provided \$110,000, and the Independent Living Services for OIB Award allocated \$281,120 in FFY 2023.

The BEN program is entirely self-funded, supported by a portion of the profits generated from its sites, such as those at Hoover Dam, which includes two gift stores, a snack bar, and a coffee shop. Nevada's program is one of only two in the United States that operates in this manner, as most similar programs rely heavily

on state or federal funding. The Bureau of Disability Adjudication, on the other hand, is fully federally funded through the Social Security Administration, meaning it will receive all necessary funding directly from the federal budget without requiring state allocations.

Mr. Elez presented a year-by-year breakdown from 2016 to 2027 of the general VR federal award amount, along with the re-allotted funds, the portion returned to the federal government due to insufficient match funding. For the current year, this re-allotted amount is \$4,000,000. Since 2023, the amount of reverted funds has decreased significantly. Projections for 2026 and 2027 indicate a further reduction, with reverted funds expected to drop to just \$802,182, the lowest level since 2007. The following slide illustrates the total Federal Grant amount minus the reverted funds. In 2016, total funding was just over \$16 million, whereas expected expenditures in 2025 will exceed \$30 million.

Something significant for us is that within the state budget, all of the expenses are divided into categories within which funds can be spent. For VR, these include Category One (personnel) and Categories Nine and Ten (client services). These client service funds are used to contract for services that the state cannot provide directly, such as education, materials, uniforms, and anything else a client needs to secure employment. The allocation for this fund has grown from \$5.7 million in 2018 to \$12.8 million in 2025, despite a dip to \$4.5 million in 2021 due to the impacts of COVID.

The budgeted funding for 2026 and 2027 has increased to \$14.79 million and \$15.87 million, respectively. These amounts are expected to ensure that VR has enough funds to serve all applicants without the need for an order of selection, as discussed earlier.

Mr. Elez then presented the breakdown of funding by budget account for SFY 2026-2027, starting with account 3268. Enhancements include the addition of new FTEs to address the growing number of program applicants. Two new positions—Grant Writer/Analyst and Management Analyst II—have been proposed. These roles are designed to reduce the agency's reliance on the legislature for new funds or to address shortfalls. The Grant Writer/Analyst will actively seek new funding opportunities, while the Management Analyst II will support administration, regardless of changes in agency leadership.

For budget account 3265, ten new positions have been requested: 1 Bureau Chief, 1 VR Supervisor, 6 VR Counselors, 1 Program Officer, and 1 VR Technician, all aimed at addressing the increasing number of program applicants. The last increase in counseling staff occurred in 2016, nearly ten years ago, making this expansion essential given the rising client numbers. The goal is that these new positions will help expedite the application and intake process. Additionally, there

is a proposal to create a new unit solely responsible for intakes, with its own supervisor, so counselors can dedicate more time to clients already in service. This project is a key focus for the year, as noted in strategic planning.

The client services budget (Category 09) has increased by \$2.1 million for 2026 and \$3.5 million for 2027. Mr. Elez discussed the Payment Card Program initiative, which will streamline the process of providing services and goods to clients, reducing administrative delays. This program will operate like a prepaid debit card, initially issued with a zero balance. Funding will be added as needed for items that aren't typically purchased through the state. Currently, the process for making purchases requires vendors to register with the State Controller's office, fill out numerous forms, and wait for account activation, which can take up to a month. This lengthy process deters many small vendors from working with the state, limiting our vendor options. It also drives up costs, as we cannot competitively price items due to the cumbersome process.

The Payment Card Program would allow counselors to upload the necessary funds onto clients' cards, which would become active within thirty minutes. Counselors would select the appropriate category for the client's purchase, and the funds would be restricted to that category. For example, if a client's card is loaded for books but they attempt to purchase clothing, the card would block the transaction. This system will significantly reduce internal paperwork. Instead of processing multiple bills from various vendors, the agency would receive a single weekly bill, simplifying the reconciliation process.

The goal is for clients to avoid having to self-identify. Instead of needing to indicate they are VR clients, they will receive a card branded with "DETR." Our sister agency, ESD, will also implement the same program, so the cards will be used informally across both agencies.

Mr. Elez thanked Administrator Kristine Nelson of Employment Security for offering to fund this program for VR. ESD will cover the current costs as well as the maintenance over the biennium. We greatly appreciate their support of our work. Since the program uses non-federal funding, the funds are matchable. As a result, ESD's contribution not only funds the program but also increases our budget by \$1.6 million.

Mr. Elez moved on to the next slide, focusing on BSBVI, Budget Account 3254. This budget account includes significant enhancements, with three new positions being added: one BSB counselor, one rehab technician, and one rehab manager dedicated solely to overseeing the Blind Business Enterprise Program. Similar to staffing additions in other areas of VR, this will help address the growing number of clients. Mr. Elez explained that, in the past, before his tenure with the agency, BSBVI operated as a separate entity from VR, which presented challenges and

led to restructuring. However, efforts are underway to reintroduce some of that separation to ensure adequate attention to visually impaired clients, while maintaining a dedicated team that works closely with the rest of the agency, facilitating shared training and resources across the state. The addition of a new counselor for BSBVI marks the first in perhaps 25 years, or at least the past 12. The average client service dollars for BSBVI in the last biennium were \$400,000, but for the upcoming biennium, that amount is expected to increase to \$900,000 in the first year and \$1 million in the second year.

The following slide outlined enhancements for Budget Account 3253 (BEN). One new position, a Maintenance Repair Specialist, has been requested to help repair and maintain the equipment at BEN sites. Additionally, there is a proposal to acquire a case management platform for BEN, as it is currently the only part of VR that does not have one.

Mr. Elez moved on to discuss the Federal Common Performance Measures, which assess the division's performance as required by Section 116 of WIOA. The slide presented the primary indicators of performance, broken down by state fiscal years 2020-2024. The Measurable Skill Gains Rate has significantly increased from 15.1% in 2020 to 47.5% in 2024. The Employment Rate – 2nd Quarter After Exit has remained relatively steady, with a slight dip in 2021. This metric is particularly important because VR cases cannot be closed until a client has been employed for at least three months. The Median Earnings in the 2nd Quarter After Exit have also risen from \$4,019 in 2020 to \$6,369 in 2024. The Employment Rate in the 4th Quarter After Exit showed a decline in 2021 and 2022 but began recovering in 2023, steadily increasing last year to 57.3%. This metric tracks clients nine months after their initial employment. Finally, the Credential Attainment Rate, which was not measured in 2020, stands at 37.7% as of 2024, reflecting a slight decrease from 2023 but still significantly higher than in 2021 and 2022.

Each of these categories has a “negotiated rate,” which represents our target goal for each metric. For the first four categories, we met or exceeded our goal for 2024. The only metric that remained below target was the Credential Attainment Rate, which achieved 37.7% out of the 40.0% goal. Mr. Elez then presented the hard numbers for individuals served: 7,339 job seekers, 624 engaged with employers, and 2,124 students and schools served, with 84 of those being schools. This data was covered briefly.

The return on investment for tax dollars (General Fund dollars) spent shows that for every dollar invested, the State of Nevada saves \$16.73 over the life of a client. This illustrates the value proposition of our program.

Chair O'Neill thanked Mr. Elez for his presentation and inquired if any members of the council had questions.

Vice-Chair Mayes complimented Mr. Elez on his work regarding the match and the funds that were unable to be drawn down. He then inquired whether the proposed Grant Writer position would be able to leverage the funding to secure additional funds from grants.

Mr. Elez stated that the Grant Writer would be exploring both federal and private sector sources, among others, to secure additional funds. The ultimate goal by 2027 is for the agency to have no leftover federal funds to draw down and to only request additional funding to expand the program.

Vice-Chair Mayes thanked Mr. Elez and expressed gratitude to the Governor for recognizing and addressing the needs of VR as an organization. He noted that the increases in their proposals were the most substantial he could recall.

It was also suggested that the council consider writing a letter to the Governor, expressing gratitude for his recognition and support.

Chair O'Neill responded that she believed the council could certainly do that. She suggested adding it to the agenda for the next NSRC meeting and then asked if there were any further questions for Mr. Elez. There were none. She concluded by commending Mr. Elez for the progress made on the debit cards and the opportunities they present.

Mr. Elez outlined the process the agency follows to seek approval for contracts related to these programs from the Governor and Legislature. If approved, he expects the program to be rolled out by Spring 2026, assuming everything proceeds as planned. He mentioned that this idea stemmed from a visit to the California Rehabilitation Department last year.

Chair O'Neill moved the meeting agenda forward to the next item.

#### **10. DIVISION REPORTS**

Chair O'Neill handed the floor back to Administrator Elez to present the information on this agenda item. In turn, Mr. Elez passed the floor to Bureau Chief Sheena Childers.

Ms. Childers began by praising the NSRC Annual Report for 2024. She then provided an update on the overall vacancy rate for VR, noting that by the end of 2024, the agency had reached an all-time low of 6.17% in vacant positions, with 6.08% for VR and 7.14% for BSBVI. Ms. Childers also highlighted several recruitments that are set to be filled soon and acknowledged the passing of longtime supervisor Alan McCandless. His position will be filled by promoting counselor David Fisher.



Ms. Childers continued by discussing the average caseload size for counselors, noting that it had increased for BVR to 81, while it had decreased slightly for BSBVI to 61.

Ms. Childers provided an overview of the goals for Competitive Integrated Employment Outcomes. For FFY 2024, the goal was to reach 550 successful closures, but by year-end, the agency achieved 481. So far in FFY 2025, 105 clients have closed with an employment outcome. The year-end goal for 2025 is to reach 575 successful closures, with "successful closure" defined as 90 days of employment. Ms. Childers mentioned that staff are being encouraged to review open cases and ensure that all necessary documentation is obtained to support successful closures. The team is committed to making every effort to meet this goal.

Moving on to Goal #2: Increase Participation of Students with Disabilities in Pre-ETS, Ms. Childers shared that for FFY 2024, the agency served an all-time high of 1,958 students, with 625 already served in FFY 2025.

For Goal #3, Ms. Childers emphasized the agency's continued effort to increase participation of potentially eligible students with disabilities in VR services. Last federal fiscal year, there were 905 Transition Student applications, and so far in FFY 2025, 245 applications have been received.

Goal #4 is to increase participation of supported employment consumers in VR. This category includes clients who are significantly disabled and in need of supportive services. For FFY 2025, the target number of clients to be served was 550, and we have already surpassed this goal, reaching 643 clients.

Goal #5 focuses on increasing the participation of Targeted Disability Groups in VR Services. This includes clients with Mental Health Disabilities, as well as those from BSBVI and the Deaf/Hard of Hearing groups who have closed with an employment outcome. For FFY 2025 so far, the numbers are 6 clients with Mental Health Disabilities, 16 from BSBVI, and 8 from the Deaf/Hard of Hearing group. This data was compared to the previous slide, which highlighted the average caseload size for both FFY 2024 and 2025.

Following this, Ms. Childers presented the FFY 24 and 25 (up to now) data for the 700 Hour Program. Currently, there are 20 active participants in the program, compared to 15 at the end of FFY 24. So far, 19 participants have completed the program and achieved competitive employment in the current federal fiscal year, compared to a total of 53 completions for the entire FFY 24.

The Fair Hearings data for the first quarter of FFY 25 shows a total of only two clients, one of which was dismissed, and the other is currently awaiting deposition post-hearing. This is compared to the total number of participants served during the 23-24 State Fiscal Year, which was 3,858. This results in a minuscule percentage of 0.05% of all clients served. This slide concluded Ms. Childers' presentation to the council.

Chair O'Neill asked if there were any questions. There were none. The meeting agenda then advanced to the next item.

#### **11. COMMENTS BY THE COUNCIL**

Chair O'Neill opened the floor to comments from the council or any desired future agenda items.

Member Sinicrope brought up the letter of correspondence to the Governor, which had been mentioned earlier in the meeting.

Chair O'Neill asked whether the letter of correspondence to the Governor could be drafted by a member of the council for approval, or if it would need to be agendized for the next meeting?

Chair O'Neill then stated that, in the meantime, a letter can be drafted for review by the council, and that, should agendizing it be required, that will be handled at the next meeting. She further stated that she believes the governor's support is crucial in these times and is greatly appreciated. Additionally, Chair O'Neill acknowledged the staff of VR who are bearing the brunt of the advocacy for the disabled clients and the community that they serve as an entity. She thanked everyone for their hard work.

Chair O'Neill went on to give a brief comment on the stance of the council since she's been chair. She explained that the goal of the NSRC has always been to provide an advisory role to Vocational Rehabilitation. It is not intended to be one of enforcement or supervision, but rather to offer a capacity and ability for a "widening of lenses," recognizing that there are areas in which we all operate as humans that we may have blind spots. When those blind spots are noticed, the council can speak up in a collaborative way to help move things forward and advocate for the community. Chair O'Neill shared that this has always been her style of wanting to work with VR, and over the last few years, especially under Administrator Elez's leadership, she's noticed a significant difference. Chair O'Neill also took the opportunity to praise the efforts and dedication of Deputy Administrator Merrill.

Chair O'Neill asked if there were any further questions or comments from the council members.



Member Kane wished to echo the sentiments of Chair O'Neill, sharing her perspective as someone who had been part of the council for many years, left, and has now returned. She observed that the contrast between the current meetings and how things were managed before Drazen and the current leadership took charge is striking. Kane expressed her satisfaction with the meeting format, which now begins with a client survey that highlights areas of success as well as areas where improvement is still needed. She then noted that the meetings conclude with well-thought-out, fiscally responsible solutions, which are developed by the very people conducting the surveys and working directly with the clients. Kane commended the agency for its tremendous progress, attributing it to the collaborative efforts of everyone involved.

Chair O'Neill once again asked if there were any further questions or agenda items. Seeing that there were none, she proceeded to the next item on the agenda.

## **12. PUBLIC COMMENT**

Chair O'Neill asked whether there were any comments from the public. There were no public comments at any location or by phone, although one had been received in writing. To read the full statement comment please refer to [Exhibit 1](#) at the end of the document. The council acknowledged the written public comment from Steven Cohen and thanked Mr. Cohen for his feedback.

Chair O'Neill moved forward to the final agenda item.

## **13. ADJOURNMENT**

Chair O'Neill announced that this meeting of the NSRC is officially adjourned at 3:59 PM.

**Minutes submitted by:** Josh Giurlani  
**Edited By:** Jenny Richter Livia

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Jenny Richter Livia, N.S.R.C. Liaison

**Approved By:**

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Raquel O'Neill, Chair

**EXHIBIT 1**



## Steven Cohen

Steven.Cohen@Alumni.UNLV.edu

January 6, 2025

Via E-mail

To Jenny Richter Livia, Council Liaison  
For the attention of:  
Nevada State Rehabilitation Council

**Re: Public Comment**

*As the state agency tasked with assisting individuals with disabilities in obtaining and maintaining competitive, integrated employment, this Agency has consistently fallen short of its mission. It is long past time for this Council, as the Agency's supervisor, to take a firm stance against the obstructive and counterproductive practices that the Agency continues to employ.*

*Despite two recent audits – one by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and the other by the Legislative Auditor – this Agency remains more focused on finding ways to appease regulators, Council Members, clients, their families, and the public than on genuinely addressing the audit recommendations. For nearly 18 years, I have been a client of this Agency, and I have witnessed firsthand its persistent failure to engage in meaningful, collaborative efforts to improve services for the community.*

*Thankfully, I am hopeful that I will be able to disengage from the Agency in the coming months. However, in the interim, I urge each of you to testify in strong opposition to the Agency's budget request once the opportunity arises. This ongoing mismanagement must end now.*

*I have raised these concerns before this Council every quarter, and though I may no longer be a client soon, I remain committed to being a part of the solution. If there is an opportunity to help bring about meaningful change, I am more than willing to contribute.*

*Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you soon. Please do not hesitate to contact me at my contact information below with any questions.*

DRAFT