

**Rhode Island Department of Human Services  
Office of Rehabilitation Services  
and  
Rhode Island State Rehabilitation Council**

**2022  
ANNUAL REPORT**

**Daniel J. McKee - Governor**



**Kimberly Brito - Interim Director**



## **The Mission of the Rhode Island Office of Rehabilitation Services is**

*“To empower individuals with disabilities to choose, prepare for, obtain, advance in, and maintain employment, economic self-sufficiency, independence and integration into society”*



### **ORS Values**

*We value the worth, dignity, rights, responsibilities, and empowerment of all persons with disabilities in achieving their individualized goals.*

*We value staff who reflect pride and commitment to excellence in achieving our mission.*

*We value a management style that fosters responsibility and accountability while encouraging creativity, initiative, and leadership throughout the organization.*

*We value community support in achieving the agency’s mission.*

*We value leadership which promotes clarity of purpose.*

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## **Message from Acting Director Kimberly Merolla-Brito,**

The Rhode Island Department of Human Services (DHS) is an organization of opportunity, providing a full array of services to the people who need us. We are dedicated to creating an environment where staff and customers have the tools, resources, and supports needed to thrive at home, work, and in the community. DHS continues to seek ways to serve our constituents in a timely and efficient manner. We are working to increase access through an enhanced customer portal and mobile app, while also implementing remote customer service and telephone interviews. The Office of Rehabilitation Services (ORS), a division of DHS, is an integral part of our mission. It is my pleasure to provide you with this annual report for Federal Fiscal Year 2022.

ORS is charged with empowering Rhode Islanders who have disabilities and voluntarily wish to obtain and maintain employment, economic self-sufficiency, independence, and full integration into society. Vocational Rehabilitation, Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired (SBVI); and Disability Determination Services (DDS) provide resources which enhance the quality of life for Rhode Island residents with disabilities.

Even with the ORS lobby closed for the health and safety of our customers and staff, the division team led by Senior Associate Director Ron Racine and Associate Director Joseph Murphy, ORS continued to make an impact on those Rhode Islanders with disabilities seeking employment. They adapted and were able to continue to provide many of the services remotely and safely. They were also able to increase their work with transition-age youth in secondary education by providing more opportunities for work experiences and work exploration, which is so important for these students' future education and career milestones.

I hope you find this 2022 Annual Report insightful, informative, and inspiring. The work of the ORS team represents an important dedication to community service driven by the desire to support our community members in a variety of ways. I am proud of their work and the impact it is making throughout our state.



***Kimberly Merolla-Brito***

## Message from the Associate Director,

On behalf of the Office of Rehabilitation Services, I am pleased to present to you the 2022 Annual Report. The mission of the Office of Rehabilitation Services has always been and continues to be to provide customized and comprehensive services to individuals with disabilities to maximize their quality of life, self-reliance, and economic independence in the community. We have included success stories that reflect the diversity of our customers and their needs. We want to illustrate the partnership between our staff and our customer that makes rehabilitation work. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program increases revenue at all levels of government and decreases the burden of income maintenance programs.



The accomplishments outlined in this annual report reflect favorably on the efforts of our staff who, by hard work and commitment, have continued a long tradition of serving Rhode Islanders with disabilities. We are also indebted to the Rhode Island State Rehabilitation Council, Governor's Advisory Council for the Blind & Visually Impaired, State Committee of Blind Vendors, and Rhode Island Council on Assistive Technology for their partnership and help in maximizing the potential of persons with disabilities. I also extend my appreciation to our hard-working and capable staff along with our many public and private partners, who have displayed tremendous resiliency as we emerge into a post-pandemic period in continuing to provide high quality services despite many challenges. It truly reflects the passion, desire, and commitment to help those we serve.

Inside you will read several individual success stories, and I am sure you will be impressed at the accomplishments of these amazing individuals. It is these stories, and many more like them, that give hope and inspiration to all of us during these challenging times and underscores why we do what we do here.

*Joseph F. Murphy*

# Vocational Rehabilitation

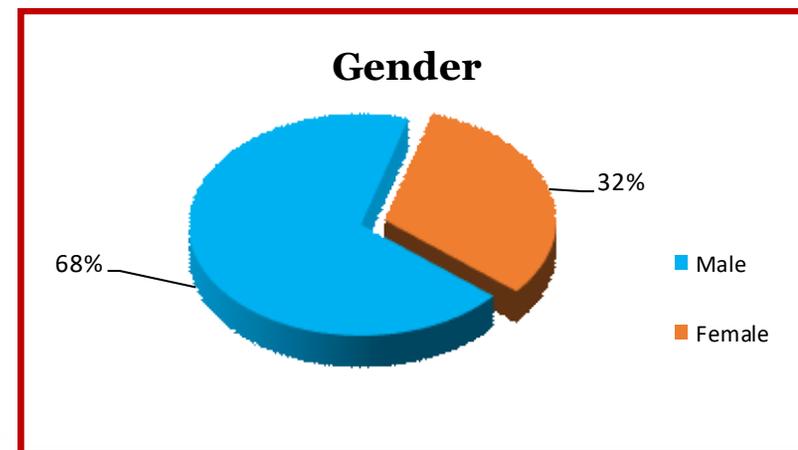
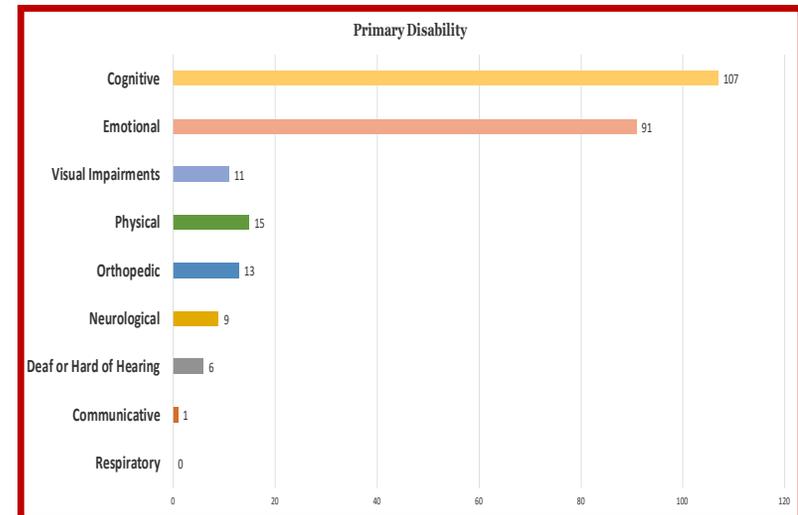
The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program is the public state and federally-funded program that assists individuals with disabilities to choose, prepare for, obtain, advance in, and maintain competitive integrated employment with employment being the successful outcome of services provided. It is expected that individuals with disabilities who apply for services are interested in becoming employed and understand that this is the focus of the VR program.

A Masters level Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) works with the individual to develop an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) that includes an employment goal. The time expected for the individual to reach the goal, the services that the individual chooses necessary to reach the employment goal, and how the services will be provided are all tailored to suit the needs of the particular individual.

## Who Are Our Customers?

Program Year (PY) 2021 (7/1/21–6/30/22)

### 253 Successfully Employed Individuals with a Disability

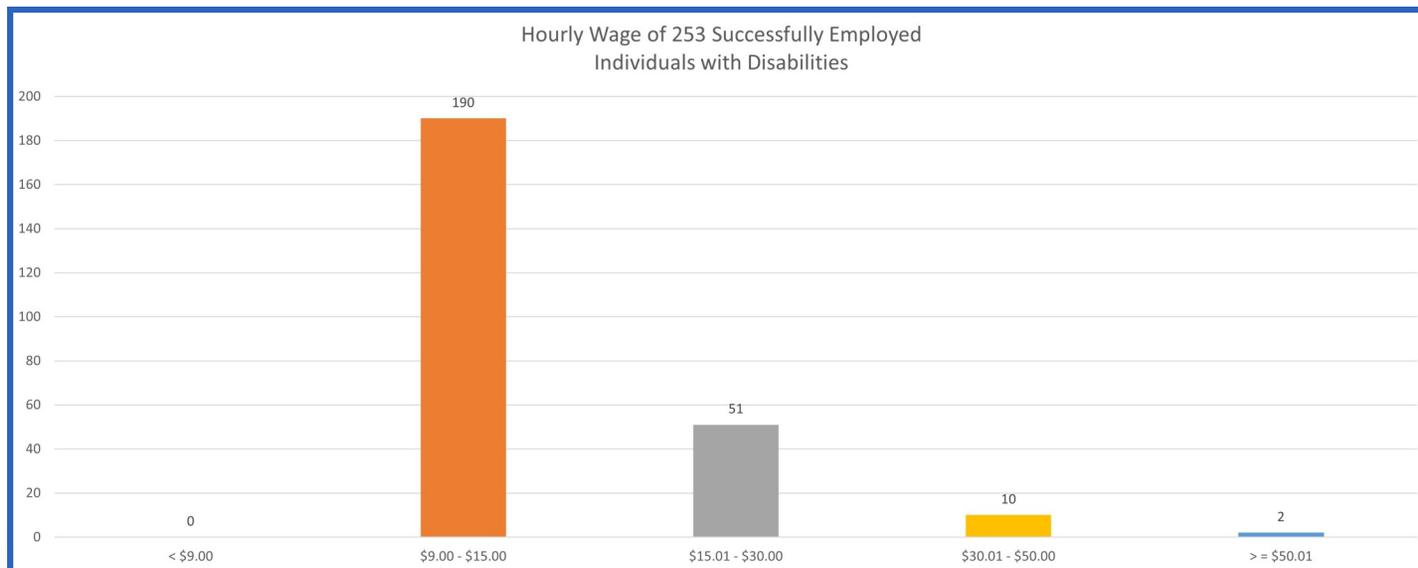


# January 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	2 State Offices Closed	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16 State Offices Closed	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30 SRC Meeting 4pm—6pm Location TBD	31	1	2	3	4

**Program Year (PY) 2021 (7/1/21 - 6/30/22) Statistics**  
**253 Successfully Employed Individuals with Disabilities**  
**Vocational Rehabilitation Statistics**

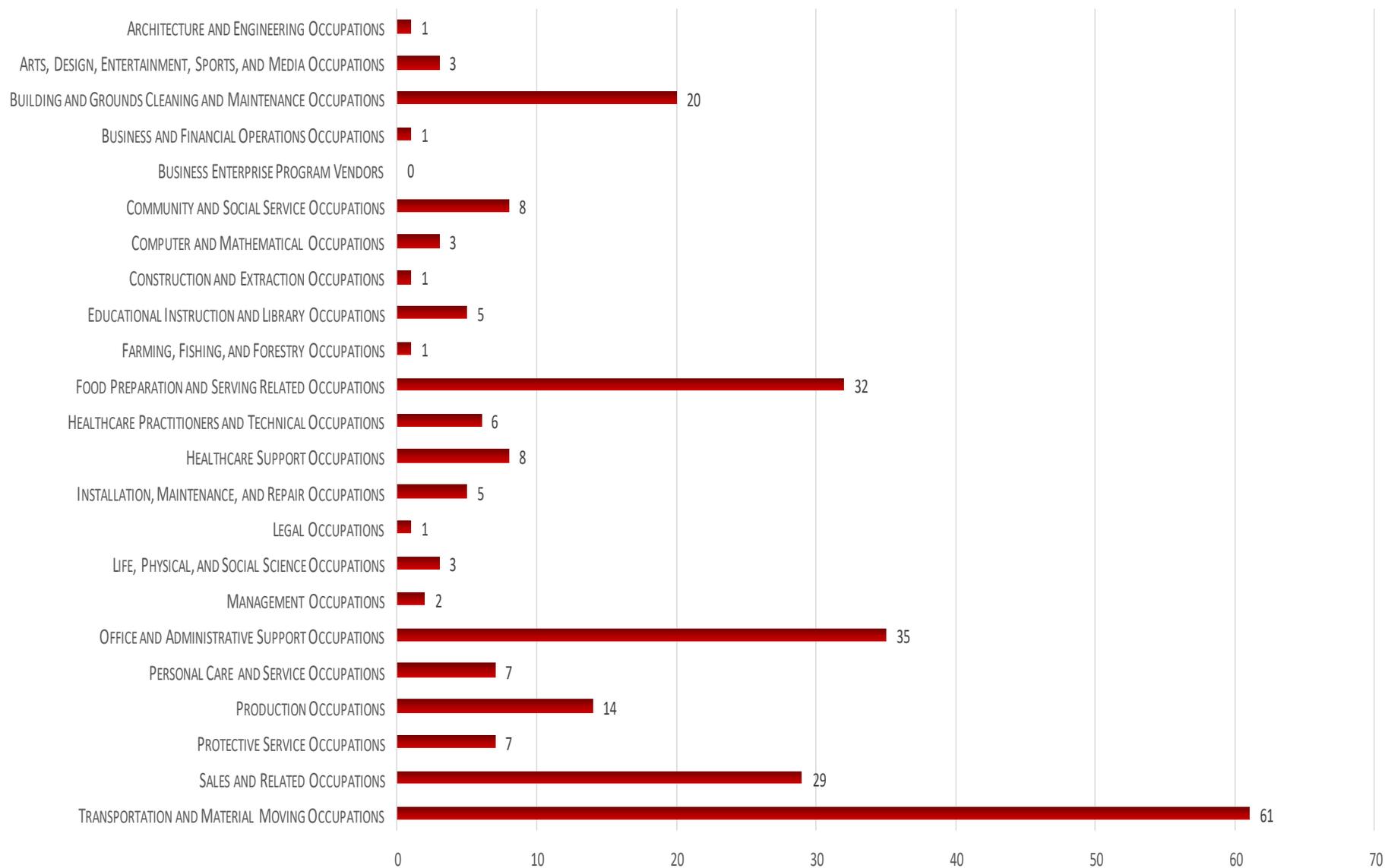
- 625** individuals applied for VR services.
- 3,932** individuals received services purchased from vendors, including evaluations, therapies, personal assistant services, job placement and training.
- 44** individuals received rehabilitation technology services to assist them to prepare for and to enter employment.
- 1,608** students are actively in Pre-ETS services, **439** are potentially eligible students and **645** are eligible students receiving these services.
- 1,458** authorizations were issued for individual Pre-Employment Transition Services to take place. These services include Pre-ETS Job Exploration, Community Based Work Experiences, Tri-Employment, Project Search, Travel Training, and Transition Academies as well as our Virtual Pre-ETS services of Virtual Job Exploration, Virtual Summer Work, Virtual Summer Work Alliance, Virtual Travel Training and Virtual College Summer Work.
- 206** Pre-ETS students applied for VR services.



# February 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
29	30	31	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14 	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	1	2	3	4

## Primary Occupation of 253 Successfully Employed Individuals with Disabilities



# March 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
26	27	28	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12 Daylight Savings Time begins	13	14	15	16	17 <i>St. Patrick's Day</i>	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27 SRC Meeting 4pm–6pm Location TBD	28	29	30	31	1

## Supported Employment

The ORS Supported Employment (SE) Services Program assists individuals with the most significant disabilities to acquire the skills and experience, along with the appropriate supports, to obtain and maintain competitive, integrated employment. As a result of the Consent Decree between the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the State of Rhode Island, ORS continues to work with the Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals (BHDDH), and Department of Education (RIDE) to develop services to meet the employment needs of individuals of all ages and differing abilities.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to create a multitude of challenges with providing in-person services to all consumers that receive employment services. ORS worked quickly to move to working remotely, and in-person vocational services were redesigned so that the Developmental Disability organizations would be able to provide virtual services with the goal of keeping individuals engaged and focused on employment. The Provider Agencies were able to provide virtual employment services and have embraced the provision of virtual services. ORS has retained virtual services as an effective means of communication and service delivery to those individuals who are still fearful about returning to in-person services.

For those individuals who have expressed a desire to work at an in-person position in the community, COVID risk discussions and agreements take place and are reviewed and signed by ORS, the Provider Agency staff, the client/guardian, and/or the support team. This is to ensure that the individual has the most up to date information from the CDC to remain safe in their working environment.

ORS and BHDDH have been working together with respective technical support providers to identify how best to meet the demand and attempt to overcome staffing shortages as a result of COVID. ORS continues to explore the development of an Integrated Resource Team (IRT) model, which utilizes a full array of available resources in the State. Services are centered around what an individual with multiple needs requires: housing, employment, and mental health services. Also, several members of the ORS SE staff participated in fidelity training for the Person-Centered Supported Employment Program (PCSEP) and Customized Employment through Griffin-Hammis being offered by BHDDH for the PCSEP providers.

Additionally, work continues on a collaborative effort with ORS, Department of Labor and Training (DLT), BHDDH, and Department of Human Services (DHS) to help individuals with disabilities obtain employment. This is an essential piece of a refreshed Employment First Initiative brought to the attention of the Governor's office. Work is being done across several State agencies to highlight the needs of individuals with disabilities. ORS and BHDDH are working with the DLT to ensure that anyone with a disability is provided the same access to any State sponsored employment programs as those without disabilities. ORS believes that the collaboration with State Agencies and the Governor's office will help increase employment opportunities for any individual with a disability and especially for those who need supported employment services.

# April 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
26	27	28	29	30	31	1
2	3	4	5	6	7 Good Friday	8
9 	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26 Administrative Professionals Day	27	28	29
30	1	2	3	4	5	6

## **Transition / Pre-Employment Transition Services**

The Office of Rehabilitation Services (ORS) provides students with disabilities the opportunity to experience and explore the world of work. Together with providers across the state, we help students make decisions about their career paths and make plans for their future.

The 2021-2022 school year brought the return of in person services and meetings, with the opportunity to accommodate those students that may still benefit from a virtual platform. Despite the challenges brought about by COVID it allowed us to look at service delivery in new ways that ultimately benefit the students we are working with. We had 14 students continue to take advantage of our virtual Job Exploration service in 21-22 school year. Counselors were attending IEP meetings in person and remotely, accommodating more students and school districts.

The Office of Rehabilitation authorized for 1,160 Pre-Employment Transition services to take place during school year 2021-22. These include a wide range of services from Job Explorations - 377, Summer Work Experiences - 198, Community Based Work Experiences - 119, Project Search - 15 participants, Tri-Employment - 160 participants, STARTURI - 10 participants, Work Readiness with 60 participants, Transition Academies had 48 participants, and 83 students were travel trained. With Counselors assigned to all public high schools as well as private and alternative schools, ORS strives to meet the needs of each program and the students they are working with.

## **Virtual Supported Employment and Non-Supported Employment Services**

ORS has returned to in-person meetings but has retained the ability to provide virtual services for those who may still be hesitant about meeting in person. ORS will also offer virtual assistance to individuals who may not have a service provider in their local area but want to seek employment.

VOCATIONAL EVALUATION (VIRTUAL): Approved for adult vocational evaluations. This is a virtual/remote service that can consist of but is not limited to exploration, interest inventory testing and virtual job shadowing.\*

VIRTUAL JOB PREPARATION: Consists of 9 hours per week for 4 weeks; scheduling of classes is up to the Provider at a minimum of 9 hours per week. All other services similar to non-virtual job prep should include a resume and interviewing skills as part of reporting. \*

JOB RETENTION: Service can be provided virtually and would include at least weekly phone calls to check in with the employer (if necessary) and the client. \*

JOB COACHING SERVICES: Provided virtually and telephonically.\*

**\* Care should be taken to include social distancing  
and Covid-19 Safety precautions.**

# May 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
30	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8 SRC Meeting 8:30 am—11:00 am Location TBD	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29 	30	31	1	2	3

# Services for the Blind & Visually Impaired (SBVI)

**Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired (SBVI)** offers a wide array of services to eligible individuals who are blind or visually impaired through its Vocational Rehabilitation Unit, Business Enterprises Program, and Social Services Program. The various services offered by these programs are designed to help individuals of all ages achieve independence at home, in the community, and in the workplace.

**Vocational Rehabilitation Program...** A Federal/State Program created to assist people who are blind or visually impaired to obtain or maintain employment. Services provided include evaluation, orientation, mobility training, rehabilitation technology, guidance and counseling, career assessment, educational planning, vocational training, provision of adaptive equipment, job development, job placement, and follow-up services.

**Business Enterprises Program...** Is the Federal/State Randolph-Sheppard Program which provides entrepreneurial employment opportunities for persons who are legally blind. Business Enterprises establishes vending facilities in state and federal buildings operated by licensed vendors by SBVI.

Presently there are 12 locations throughout the state. Types of facilities include vending machines, micro markets, small coffee shops, larger food service sites serving hot and cold entrees prepared on-site. All operate under the name of "Coffee Plus".

**Assistive Technology Access Partnership (ATAP)...**The Office of Rehabilitation Services is the lead Agency for the Rhode Island Assistive Technology Access Partnership (ATAP). ATAP is a statewide program funded under the Assistive Technology Act of 1998. The Rhode Island Assistive Technology Access Partnership (ATAP) is designed as a statewide partnership of organizations, each with a targeted assistive technology focus, working together to improve access to and acquisition of assistive technology for individuals.

ATAP's main initiatives include: Device Demonstration, Device Loan, Device Re-Use, and Training, Public Awareness, Collaboration, Information & Referral. In total Statewide, 138 individuals were provided AT devices. ATAP Partners include Adaptive Telephone Equipment Loan Program (ATEL), East Bay Educational Collaborative (EBEC), Ocean State Center for Independent Living (OSCIL), and TechACCESS of RI.

**Social Services Program...** Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired coordinates a federal comprehensive service program which focuses primarily on children from age 3 through age 14, elderly individuals, and individuals for whom a vocational goal is not feasible.

**Children's Case Management Services** include family casework, coordination with Early Intervention Programs, educational guidance, summer camp for youths, arrangement of ophthalmologist and low vision evaluations, and information and referral to appropriate community programs.

**Independent Living for Older Blind Program** provides case management services, along with ancillary services for mobility and orientation, rehabilitation teaching for skills training in activities of daily living, management of low vision, provisions of adaptive equipment, and information and referral to support groups and appropriate community services.

**Adaptive Telephone Equipment Loan Program (ATEL)...** The ATEL Program loans telephone equipment to residents of the State of Rhode Island who have hearing, speech, or neuro-muscular (unable to dial or hold a receiver) impairments and have a signed certificate of disability. Equipment is issued on a first-come, first-serve basis.

# June 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
28	29	30	31	1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	1

# SBVI Statistics

## Business Enterprises Program

- **12** Vending facilities were supported by the Randolph-Sheppard Business Enterprises Program (BEP) at Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired. These 12 facilities collectively also provided employment for numerous individuals around the state. Multiple operators have a second location they managed with operations continuing to adjust to the changing market and post-pandemic environment
- Highest reported net earnings by a vendor: **\$344,000**

## Independent Living Services for Older Individuals Who Are Blind (OIB)

- **345** older individuals who are blind or visually impaired (over age 55) received services from the Independent Living for Older Blind Program. Annual statistics show that:
- **95%** of individuals over age 55, served reported feeling that they are in greater control and are more confident in their ability to maintain their current living situation as a result of services they received.
- **98%** of individuals receiving AT (assistive technology) services and training maintained or improved functional abilities that were previously lost or diminished as a result of vision.

## Social Services for the Blind

SBVI staff continued to provide quality critical services in 2021 supplementing in-person service delivery with virtual, telephonic, or remote instruction to adults focusing on independent living.

Outreach and awareness efforts (post pandemic) have resumed to include numerous resource fairs, disability aging and health conferences, deaf-blind services, senior expo's, community and health centers, and senior programs.

Notably- Rhode Island again recognized its annual White Cane Awareness Day celebration on October 15<sup>th</sup> ,2021 in celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the introduction of the white cane.

## Children's Services

RISBVI continues its role of supporting parents through advocacy and service coordination for children with severe visual impairments.

SBVI Administrator and staff are appointed to serve on the Rhode Island Vision Education Services Program Advisory Board to monitor, review, and update the RIVESP work plan, in order to assure the future of quality educational services to visually impaired children in school/educational settings in Rhode Island.

## Newsline

- No. of individuals that are registered for this newspaper reading service provided by the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), and funded by SBVI: **534**

## Assistive Technology Access Partnership (ATAP)

- No. of individuals that received information from Assistive Technology Access Partnership (ATAP) Resource Centers about assistive technology (AT) and funding options: **1,048**
- No. of individuals that received Demonstrations: **143**
- No. of participants that received Training: **1,609**
- No. of individuals that received Device Loan: **88**
- No. of individuals that received Reused Devices: **25**

## Adaptive Telephone Equipment Loan Program (ATEL)

- No. of individuals provided with specialized equipment through the ATEL (Adaptive Telephone Equipment Loan) Program: **150**

The ATAP and ATEL Programs reached out to various agencies to provide technical assistance and information and guidance to assist with tele-support and Assistive Technology plans for the individuals that they provide supports too.

# July 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
25	26	27	28	29	30	1
2	3	4 	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31	1	2	3	4	5

# Disability Determination Services

The Rhode Island Disability Determination Services (RI DDS) is a unit within the Office of Rehabilitation Services, which operates under a “state-federal” partnership. The function of the RI DDS is to make determinations as to the medical eligibility of adults and children with physical and/or mental impairments who have applied for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and/or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits. The RI DDS is assigned a budgeted workload under a regulatory agreement with the Social Security Administration (SSA). The RI DDS is 100 percent financed by SSA to adjudicate initial disability applications, appeals of cases initially denied, and continuing disability reviews. The RI DDS also performs disability hearings on cases in which benefits have been terminated.

In total, the RI DDS processed 12,517 disability cases this year. Based on increased staffing and an expected increase in intake, RI DDS anticipates processing approximately 14,000 cases in FFY2022. COVID-19 continued to detrimentally impact case receipts and clearances and most all aspects of case processing during FFY2022, albeit not as drastically as the previous two years.

RI DDS has completed the transition to the new computer system that SSA developed. The system is referred to as DCPS (Disability Case Processing System). We started the roll out in March of 2017. We currently have 100% of the staff using the system. SSA is constantly improving the software and tools that

the examiners use in their daily functions to enhance timely and accurate decisions and make the system more functional for users. Users are no longer working in dual environments. We turned off the Legacy system in June of 2020 when the contract was up. We were one of the first states to switch over to DCPS and now all states in the country are working in this case processing system.

In late 2020, the federal hiring freeze that had been in place since 2016 came to an end. RI DDS was able to post and fill all vacancies, as well as 7 newly created, 100 percent federally-funded full-time positions. These new hires began onboarding in September 2020 with the final 4 positions coming onboard in January 2021. This increase in staffing has helped us increase productivity while decreasing processing time in FFY22.

RI DDS continues to be faced with programmatic challenges caused by COVID-19. COVID-19 caused disruption in our case processing because in-person medical appointments were halted, and face-to-face consultative examinations were suspended. Work on Continuing Disability Reviews (CDRs), prehearings, and hearings were suspended per SSA directives from April 2020 – August 2020.

COVID-19 related policies precluded any claims from being denied for failure to cooperate or insufficient evidence during this same timeframe. This resulted in a slower processing time. We have only recently resumed face-to-face hearings. Despite the

# August 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
30	31	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14 Victory Day State offices are closed	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31	1	2

case processing challenges related to COVID-19, the RI DDS processed 12,974 disability claims. The RI DDS has been able to maintain excellent accuracy ratings of 97.6%. We ended FFY19 with an overall processing time of 127, which is below the national threshold of 184 days.

Rhode Island continues to operate a CDI Unit (Cooperative Disability Investigations) to help combat fraud in the program. This unit investigates fraud at initial and reconsideration applications, prior to claimants being put in pay status. Recently, they have been able to work fraud cases for individuals already in pay status. The referrals come from the field offices, DDS, and the public. The CDI unit consists of a DDS examiner, a field office representative, two investigators from the Attorney General’s office, and a Special Agent. SSA continues to put a high emphasis on combatting fraud in the program.

### **Local Social Security Field Offices**

30 Quaker Lane, 1st Floor  
Warwick, RI 02886-0111  
1-866-964-2038

4 Pleasant Street  
Pawtucket, RI 02860  
1-866-931-7079

Pavilion Plaza  
2168 Diamond Hill Road  
Woonsocket, RI 02895  
1-877-229-3542

130 Bellevue Avenue  
Newport, RI 02840  
1-866-253-5607

1 Empire Plaza, 6<sup>th</sup> floor  
Providence, RI 02903  
1-877-402-0808

## **Disability Determination Services Statistics**

<b>12,974</b>	Total cases were received by the Disability Determination Services (DDS)
<b>12,517</b>	Claims were processed by the DDS
<b>7,222</b>	Initial claims were filed
<b>6,623</b>	Initial claims were processed
<b>3,813</b>	Continuing Disability Review cases were completed
<b>233</b>	Pre-Hearing Cases were processed, resulting in <b>149</b> Disability Hearing decisions
<b>3,317</b>	Consultative Exams were purchased
<b>10,055</b>	Medical Evidence Records were purchased
<b>\$1,171,570</b>	Total Medical Costs with Total DDS Budget of <b>\$ 10,479,245</b>

# September 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
27	28	29	30	31	1	2
3	4 State Offices Closed <b>Labor Day</b>	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

# Success Stories

**A.H.**

**Counselor: Grace Pires**

“AH is a 37-year-old who re-applied to ORS 5 years ago wanting a career change from her position as a Library Assistant. AH presented with Profound Bilateral Sensorineural Hearing Loss and Anxiety. She was having issues with hearing on the phone, but is able to lip read and can converse face-to-face. AH benefitted from Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) during virtual meetings as COVID-19 brought client meetings virtual. AH’s dream job was to have an investigative position like she had when she was an intern, but AH was also interested in teaching, paralegal, office work, and medical coding.

ORS assisted AH with Development and Placement services for her career change transition. AH had numerous interviews

and was becoming frustrated and disappointed that interviews didn’t result in a job offer.

In October 2021, AH e-mailed her ORS Counselor that she had an interview at a state agency for an investigative position.

The next month, November 2021, AH e-mailed her ORS Counselor and Supervisor that she was selected for the position! AH informed her ORS Counselor that she was having difficulty with the CapTel Phone. In partnership with AH's employer, Adaptive Telephone Equipment Loan Program (ATEL), ORS, Department of Administration (DOA), and Department of Information Technology (DoIT) replaced her phone with a different CapTel phone and CBI/modem installation was put in place for AH to perform her job duties.

AH thanked everyone for making this accommodation happen and loves her Investigative position!”

*\*AH dislikes having her photograph taken and would prefer it to not be at her desk/office as she would rather maintain a level of confidentiality.*

# October 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9 State Offices Closed Columbus Day	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31 	1	2	3	4

## **BEST - Business Engagement Specialist Team**

Since 2019, a group comprised of Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRC's) with guidance from Regional Supervisors, Assistant Administrator for Vendor Affairs & Workforce Development, and the Administrator of Vocational Rehabilitation began to meet regularly with the intention of formally establishing a Business Engagement Specialist Team (BEST). Part of this was driven by the VRC's recognition that there is a critical lack of awareness of the agency and the services in the business community. Many VRC's found out in reaching out to businesses there was no organized procedure in place to do so. Additionally, WIOA federal regulations mandate that state Vocational Rehabilitation agencies consider businesses as a secondary VR customer. The need to engage with the business community is a critical piece of WIOA to develop work-based learning for students and youth with disabilities and employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities, including those with the most significant disabilities.

The BEST unit is a specialized unit that markets ORS's services to the business community by educating businesses about the role of ORS. The team also supports businesses' staffing needs, including screening and identifying qualified job applicants, dispelling myths around employing individuals with disabilities through education, and educating Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors and job seekers about labor market demand. This group saw an opportunity to formally establish themselves within the agency and began meeting

regularly to work diligently with technical assistance from WINTAC (now VRTAC.)

As a result of the BEST Team's efforts and the number of requests from the business community to partner, ORS decided to expand BEST by assigning additional counselors to the team to ensure that ORS can deliver the same level of support and services to current and future community business partners. Each region of ORS is now represented by at least one counselor, with most having two representatives. The BEST Team will continue to meet on a weekly basis to discuss job openings, new partnerships, training ideas, job fairs, and any other business-related information. The information discussed is then presented to each region by their respective representative, so that it is reaching the entire agency.

Additionally, BEST has collaborated with BHDDH and the Governor's Workforce Board to align practices and ensure First Point of Contact process is in place.

Some of the consulting services the BEST team offers include the following: Talent acquisition, Customized employee training strategies, Customized comprehensive task analysis, Assistive Technology, Job Accommodations Training, Disability etiquette, Referral services for current employees, Diversity in the workplace training, Information on Federal Tax Credit Incentives, Support in marketing and advertising for talent, and Worksite BEST - Business Engagement Specialist Team

# November 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
29	30	31	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13 State Offices Closed  Veterans Day	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23 	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	1	2

## **BEST - Business Engagement Specialist Team (cont.)**

ergonomic evaluations. (Trainings in any of these areas could be tailored to one's specific business needs.)

Some highlights of what this team has already accomplished include forming working partnerships with larger companies like Sodexo, IGT, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, and CVS to help diversify and support their workforce; engaging regularly with other State agencies (i.e. DLT, BHDDH) to work together, collaboratively, with the business community and the consumers we serve; actively pursuing and increased their online and social media presence by creating platforms such as (Linked In and Facebook) to reach consumers and businesses alike; and moving forward will continue to explore other innovative ways to reach out to employers.

What this team has accomplished in the short amount of time they have been together, amidst the hurdles and complications of working remotely during this pandemic, is a true testament to the dedication and resiliency of this agency.



**James Schroeder**  
**Food Service Worker**  
**Counselor: Laura Allbee**

James Schroeder was recently hired at Roger Williams Park Zoo as a food service worker , but his story began three years ago. James graduated from Cranston High School East. He then had the opportunity to explore his vocational interests at the Cranston Transitional Program where he explored a variety of job interests. James then applied for and was accepted into the Project Search program for his final year of school. Project Search is a program collaborated on by ORS, BHDDH, Cranston School District, Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Rhode Island and a supporting ORS vendor that is unique, business-led, one-year, school-to-work program. Students are called interns and are completely immersed in the workplace. The program allows for a combination of classroom instruction, career exploration, and relevant job-skills training through three strategically designed internships.

James was hired and started his position in April 2022 while he was still a Project Search student. This allowed James to be supported by his team including ORS, BHDDH, West Bay Collaborative, and the Cranston School Department to start his job and become acclimated with his new job duties and environment while maintaining his internship status at Project Search. James hopes that one day he can build up more skills and work place familiarity to be able to work with the animals and plants at the zoo.

# December 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
26	27	28	29	30	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25 	26	27	28	29	30
31 	1	2	3	4	5	6

**Corey Kelly**  
**Warehouse/Market Associate**  
**Counselors: Rosemarie Aponte/Gina Albanese**



*Joanne Corcoran, Corey Kelley*

Corey was referred to ORS services in May, 2019 when he applied for services. He was found eligible for services on May 14, 2019. Corey was diagnosed with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Some of his functional limitations included: Communication since he was not able to communicate verbally and required a picture book that he could use to communicate. He sometimes had difficulty understanding directions.

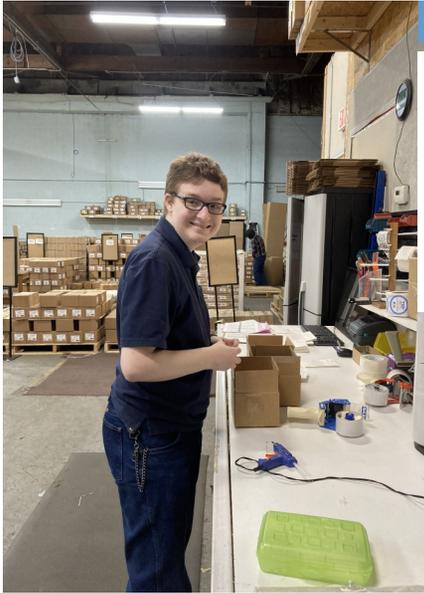
Corey was referred for an Assistive Technology Assessment for an Augmentative Communication Device, with TechAccess of Rhode Island (an ORS-approved vendor). He was also referred to a Community-Based Work Experience with the Fogarty Center (an approved ORS vendor).

After the completion of the Assistive Technology Assessment for an Augmentative Communication Device, the following

equipment was recommended for Corey: the Proloquo2 Go iPad voice output App, Book Creator App, and Protector Case for iPad. Corey was able to participate in a trial period using the apps to develop independence with the assistance of his team. He received training in the use of these apps.

Corey was hired by We Share Hope, a local supermarket, as a result of his Community-Based Work Experience. He also received Supported Employment Job Development and Placement Services. Currently, Corey can utilize his iPad and the apps recommended to communicate effectively with his employer, coworkers, direct support staff, and his roommates. It has been reported that Corey's mood has improved since he is able to communicate better. As of today, Corey has benefitted from Job Retention and Support services to be able to maintain his job and continues developing proficiency in the use of his iPad and the apps that have been installed. Finally, the employer is very satisfied with Corey's performance at the job site, and he has been able to maintain his job with the support provided, like assistive technology devices, direct support staff, and reasonable accommodations like a working schedule that fulfill the client's and employer's needs.





**Daniel Asselin**  
**Stock Clerk**

**Counselor: Daniel Greaves/  
Teresa O'Brien**

Dan was first introduced to ORS while in High School. At that time, he decided to explore different career opportunities and experiences inde-

pendently. Dan returned to ORS right after obtaining his High School diploma in June 2019. For ORS and Dan to understand his learning style and areas where he may need assistance, Dan participated in a Basic Learning Disability Assessment and Clinical Evaluation. These evaluations indicated that Dan showed exceptional visual and motor strengths. Through guidance and counseling, Dan chose his first career goal of stock clerk and began preparing for employment.

In May 2020, Dan participated in Job Club, where he was in a classroom setting with peers working on increasing work readiness skills. At this time, Dan was not fully ready to engage in services, so he decided to take more time to think about his future.

In December of 2021, Dan reengaged with ORS, re-enrolled in Job Club, and demonstrated significant enthusiasm for employment by the end. At the beginning of the Job Club, Dan would be late, dressed in casual clothing, had poor communication, and did not participate in group discussions. By the end of the Job Club, Dan asked questions, dressed for success, was highly motivated, and was on time for all sessions. Dan learned how to attach his resume to an email, search for jobs with more detail, and respond to emails.

Although Dan's work skills improved, locating a smaller warehouse in Southern Rhode Island was challenging. Several businesses were explored, but there were always barriers like employment hours or job requirements. In March of 2022, a connection was made by a member of the ORS B.E.S.T. (Business Employment Specialist Team). They found him in a small warehouse that repackages over-the-counter products for businesses.

On April 25th, 2022, Dan was offered a position as a stock clerk in their warehouse. He currently works 20 hours per week, earning an hourly wage of \$14.00. Retention supports were provided to Dan for two months until Dan no longer needed these supports, and his file was successfully closed since he was now working independently.



**Alexander Kalajain**  
**Activities Assistant**  
**Counselor: Kathleen Jones**

Alexander (Alex) was first referred to ORS by East Greenwich High School in 2017. He needed assistance with career exploration, identifying his vocational aptitudes, and determining

the support he would need to be successful. While in high school Alex utilized an Individualized Education (IEP) Plan to support his learning differences, life skills, and communication. With the guidance and counseling that he received from his ORS counselor, Alex decided that he wanted to explore a career in the therapy field. Before graduating from high school, Alex participated in a vocational assessment, summer work, and a driving assessment.

After high school graduation, Alex started his academic journey at Rhode Island College in the fall of 2017. To best support his post-secondary learning, Alex coordinated communication between RIC's Disability Services and his ORS counselor to determine what accommodations if any ORS could assist with. Alex was then referred to a rehab engineer by his ORS counselor for an assistive technology evaluation. As a result of the evaluation, Alex was provided with an iPad, a digital recorder, and a printer.

Additionally, Alex was referred to RI Hospital's ENT Department to support the repair of his FM System.

Throughout his time at RIC, Alex maintained communication with his ORS counselor and received continuous guidance & counseling and multiple summer work opportunities that included: Skills in Motion, Gallery Night Providence, United Cerebral Palsy, and St. Elizabeth Home. Alex also maintained a part-time job as a produce clerk at Stop and Shop.

In December 2021 Alex graduated with his bachelor's degree in Art with a double major with a concentration in painting and photography. He outreached to his ORS counselor immediately to get assistance with finding employment that matched his education. ORS counselor and Alex completed labor market research in art therapy which laid the foundation for future job searches. Alex expressed the need for preparing for employment and was referred to work preparation with a Community Rehabilitation Provider in January 2022. As part of the service, Alex developed his core skills and the confidence he needed to enter his career field. With a professional resume in hand, Alex began applying for jobs.

In March 2022 Alex accepted an Activities Assistant position at St Elizabeth Home. He is currently working 24 hours a week and is receiving benefits through the employer. Additional vocational support provided to assist Alex in maintaining his employment was retention. Alex is hoping to move to full-time employment once the opportunity is available. Alex is grateful for all the services and support that ORS has offered him over the years. "I was glad I was able to experience job settings before jumping into anything and get the job skills I needed to get a successful job.

**Kathleen Palumbo**  
**Recovery Support Counselor**  
**Counselor: Valerie Williams**

Kathleen applied to ORS in February 2019 and became eligible in April 2019. Kathleen had a medical condition that prevented her from working as an X-ray and CT Scan Technologist at RI Hospital. ORS counselor Valerie Williams met with Kathleen in June 2021 after she had finished her bachelor's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies in Human Services from URI on May 2021. Kathleen wanted to use her newly acquired bachelor's degree and work as a Counselor.

Kathleen's employment plan included services for guidance and counseling, vocational assessment, job development, placement, and retention services. Jenna Fredette provided these services at Work Opportunities Unlimited (WOU). Kathleen, Jenna, and Valerie met to discuss her employment goal and areas of interest. Kathleen had worked as an X-ray technician and CT Scan Technologist for RI Hospital from 1992-2014 but could no longer maintain her employment due to her medical condition.

Jenna of WOU provided employment assistance with obtaining a position as a Counselor.

Kathleen applied for a Recovery Support Counselor position at AdCare, North Kingstown, RI. Kathleen assists patients by conducting group counseling sessions, guiding them through crises, and being available to them to process progress/obstacles in recovery. Kathleen began employment at AdCare on February 1st, 2022, working 28 hours weekly. Once employed, Kathleen received Benefit Planning, scrubs, and shoes needed for her career.

Kathleen mentioned that this was the 2nd job interview she had had in her life, and she was successfully hired. Kathleen is pleased with this employment and is grateful for her help from ORS. ORS services helped her obtain, maintain, and retain her job.

*Kathleen is happy that she now has another career that she loves and is passionate about.*



*Kole Zeller, Hector Romano*

**Kole Zeller**  
**Amazon Shopper**  
**Counselor: Gina Albanese**

Kole Zeller has been involved with ORS since March, 2022. He is a friendly, motivated 26-year-old gentleman. Kole has been successfully employed since April, 2022 at Whole Foods.

Kole was hired by Whole Foods in Providence, RI as an Amazon Shopper. Kole obtained assistive technology: an ORCAM MyEye Smart Reader to assist him with reading customer orders. Kole's current duties include shopping, picking selected items and packaging items for delivery for Whole Foods through Amazon. Kole reports that he enjoys his job. In addition, Kole is a very social and outgoing gentleman who is well liked by his coworkers and is an integral part of the community at Whole Foods. He is very motivated, and he will be working on expanding his work skills at Whole Foods. Kole has been assisted by ORS and Hector Ranero from Work Inc.. He has developed a very nice relationship with his job developer Hector. Kole has received services through ORS that include Supported Employment Job Development, Job Placement and Job Retention. Kole is currently working 10-20 hours per week and is an integral part of the Whole Foods Market.

## White Cane Awareness Day

On Saturday, October 15, 2022, Rhode Island celebrated White Cane Awareness Day at the Garden City Center in Cranston. The event was hosted by IN-SIGHT and included hands-on demonstrations, live music, guest speakers, sweet treats, awesome giveaways and much more!

*What is White Cane Awareness and why is it important?* The white cane is a powerful symbol of independence for people living with visual impairments. Yet very few people understand the importance of this tool for an individual with a visual impairment and how it assists them with living a full and independent life.

Speakers at the event included emcee Chris Bove, Rhode Island House Speaker Joseph Sherkachi, State Representative Julie Casimiro, State House page Ryan Lukowicz, local storyteller Mark Binder, and featured speaker Jay Blake from Follow A Dream.

Several agencies helped sponsor the event including IN-SIGHT, the Rhode Island Lions Sight Foundation, the Providence Veterans Administration Vision Program, Rhode Island Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired, and the National Federation of the Blind Rhode Island Chapter.



*Christine Hammond at Senior Health Fair*

## **Counselor: Molly Faeber**

Mrs. R is a retired woman who is still active in the education field, particularly as the president of the board of a local charter school. She has received training from SBVI on her iPhone, iPad, laptop, and Amazon Echo over the past several years, all of which has helped her to perform various activities of daily living successfully and independently. Recently, her responsibilities for the school board she serves on increased, and she found herself in need of a device to magnify printed documents while she attended Zoom meetings via her iPad or laptop. SBVI was able to provide a desktop CCTV so that Mrs. R could comfortably view documents on a separate screen while in these meetings, which she reported has been extremely helpful. This has allowed her to seamlessly access the same information as other board members and to fully participate in meetings.

Ms. G is a retired journalist in her 80's who lives alone and reported no longer being able to read newspapers or other printed publications due to her macular degeneration. The Rehabilitation Teacher worked with Ms. G to enroll her as a member of NFB-Newsline, and provided training to allow her to access the system independently. She is now able to read her favorite publications, including the New York Times and the Atlantic Magazine, independently via the phone system. She also learned to connect her iPhone to a Bluetooth speaker for better sound quality. When Ms. G reported issues keeping track of her schedule and contact list due to distortion caused by her eye condition, the Rehabilitation Technologist began working with her to transfer her hand written contacts into the Contacts app on her iPhone, and provided training on how to manage her schedule on the Amazon Echo. Ms. G is now on her way to having a fully accessible calendar which she can use exclusively by voice, and a digital contacts list which she can access with Siri.

## 2021 Raymond A. Carroll Award

The Raymond A. Carroll Award is given to an individual who exemplifies the same dedication in serving individuals with disabilities as Mr. Carroll had during his forty-two years of state service. Raymond Carroll began his career at the Office of Rehabilitation Services in 1966 and retired in 2008. During that time, he demonstrated his awareness of the needs of individuals with disabilities and was a dedicated and effective advocate for improving the standards set for programs providing services for those individuals with disabilities.

Several of the ORS staff nominated Daniel Moitoso, Desktop Support Specialist, for the Raymond A. Carroll award stating “Daniel always goes above and beyond when needed and is readily available to tackle the technological challenges staff encounter daily.” Whether it be your computer or cell phone, he is there to help with everything from changing batteries in your keyboard/mouse, to installing and updating programs and security, to giving a quick lesson in Adobe, and finding those lost contacts in your phone.

He troubleshoots uncooperative audio and visual settings during Zoom meetings as well as printing and scanning issues. Danny is always there to fix the problem. Just make sure to put a ticket in!

We learned to navigate and provide services during the pandemic to our clients and keep business going as usual the best we could.



### Past Recipients

**2011** - Sharon DiPinto

Sr. Human Services Policy & Systems Specialist

**2012** - Kathy McCabe

Sr. Rehabilitation Counselor

**2013** - Sherry Olink

Jr. Resource Specialist

**2014** - Teresa Scaramuzzo-DiMattia

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor II

**2015** - Rosemary Feeney

Sr. Human Services Business Officer

**2016** - Paula Stachelek

Word Processing Typist

**2017** - Sheridan Lomax

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor

**2018** - Rosemarie Aponte

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor

**2019** - Karen Davis

Asst. Administrator - Supported Employment

**2020** - Michelle DeVita

Sr. Word Processing Typist

# What Are The State Rehabilitation Councils?

The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) is the consumer voice for the VR program. Federally-mandated membership requirements include a broad range of stakeholders to ensure that various constituencies have a voice in the conduct of the VR agency. This consumer voice is absolutely necessary for the VR program to partner with individuals with disabilities to jointly facilitate the accomplishment of their dreams of independence, full community integration, and employment.

SRC members represent the state agency to a broad array of partners such as employers, parents, educators, community rehabilitation programs, and other stakeholders in the VR program. They reinforce the value that individuals with disabilities are able to achieve quality employment outcomes and become contributing members of society.

Though mandated by federal law, the partnership between SRCs and VR extends beyond the shared accomplishment of mandated tasks. Specifically, the partnership is a call to action to advocate for and to hear the voices of the people served by VR. The partnership must be a commitment and priority for the partners in order to make the VR system a change agent whose goal is to assist people with disabilities to become employed in integrated, competitive employment!

*(McGuire-Kuletz, M., Tomlinson, P., & Hurley, K.B. 2019). McGuire-Kuletz, M., Tomlinson, P., & Hurley, K.B. page 1 (2019).*

*The State Rehabilitation Council – vocational rehabilitation partnership under WIOA - Washington, DC: The George Washington University, Center for Rehabilitation Counseling Research and Education.*

## The Council's Mission

To work with ORS assuring that all Rhode Islanders with disabilities are able to obtain and keep meaningful and satisfying employment.

## Our Vision

The SRC is an independent body of diverse members that works together to insure continuous improvement in ORS employment outcomes;

- \*Enhances communication among all people and groups committed to increase opportunity for people with disabilities;
- \*Increases employer awareness of people with disabilities as a productive human resource pool; and
- \*Has the respect of decision-makers in the allocation of resources.
- \*Conduct a review and analysis of the effectiveness of consumer satisfaction with the functions and activities of the State Agency as they relate to employment outcomes.

**How to Become a RISRC Member:** The Governor appoints members. As SRC members and VR advocates, we work in strategic partnership to increase the employment of people with disabilities in competitive, integrated jobs of their choice and in keeping with their skills and abilities. Federal law governing membership requires that certain categories be represented on the council (e.g., businesses, community rehabilitation providers, disability groups), and these category assignments are made by the Governor's office, in light of applicant experience and expressed representational preferences. If you are interested or want more information about the RISRC, please contact us at [riscrc@cox.net](mailto:riscrc@cox.net).

# Message from the State Rehabilitation Council Co-Chairs

## Highlights 2021-2022

### Dear Friends,

It is a great honor to present the FY2022 Rhode Island State Rehabilitation Council Annual Report. Over the past year, we have worked to regroup after the COVID-19 pandemic. The SRC has enacted a positive and major change; we have elected to use Co-chairs to help with time constraints of member volunteers. Our Council comprises people with disabilities, family members, employers, and those interested in ensuring that people with disabilities have access to supports and services that help create career opportunities. This collaboration helps as we advise ORS and work to improve the systems that support individuals with disabilities.

The Rhode Island State Rehabilitation Council had a successful year supporting ORS in its work on behalf of people with disabilities. This is an overview of our activities of the past year along with goals for 2023. Reports from the committees that do the work of the Council, and a list of Council members with brief biographies of those members and the constituency each member represents, are included.

The Council continues to learn, adapt, and be creative in how it functions during the post-pandemic era. We continually adjusted the format to find the right balance of moving our work forward, but COVID-19 continues to create challenges for us, especially with loss of membership.

In addition to loss of membership, moving meetings from a virtual platform to in-person meetings continue to be challenging. The SRC includes members who have themselves, or whose family members have compromised health and unfortunately, are unable to meet in person. The SRC is working to address this barrier, so that all may participate in meetings.

We applaud the ORS counselors and their vendors for keeping the momentum going with transition activities, career exploration, and virtual career events during the pandemic and returning to in-person work with consumers now that restrictions have been lifted.

As the pandemic brought numerous challenges, it also created opportunities for ORS counselors to streamline paperwork processes and procedures, more time to collaborate with the business community as well as develop new strategies with employers to strengthen working relationships and improve employers' knowledge of ORS services.

### Our Partners

Office of Rehabilitation Services (ORS); Rhode Island State Independent Living Council; Governor's Workforce Board; Governor's Commission on Disabilities.

## **Goals of the Council**

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act charges the State Rehabilitation Council with meeting the following goals:

- ◆ Review, analyze, and advise ORS regarding the performance of their responsibilities in planning, developing, and implementing services to persons with disabilities in order to affect competitive employment outcomes,
- ◆ Advise and assist in the application of the State Plan, strategic plans, reports, needs assessments, and evaluations required under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended,
- ◆ Conduct a review and analysis of the effectiveness of consumer satisfaction with the functions and activities of the State Agency as they relate to employment outcomes,
- ◆ Advise the State Agency and provide for working relationships between the State Agency and the Statewide Independent Living Council,
- ◆ Perform such other functions as the Council deems appropriate and that are comparable to the other functions performed by the Council, and
- ◆ Prepare and submit an Annual Report to the Governor and the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA).

## **Our 2022 Activities**

In 2022, members of the Council assisted ORS with:

- \* Order of Selection (OOS) - The Council continued its ongoing mission to monitor ORS's Order of Selection and Waitlist to determine how quickly individuals were removed from the Waitlist and into employment services. This year saw an opening of the Waitlist, with no consumers on the list for the first time in several years. We applaud ORS's efforts to eliminate the Waitlist.
- \* The Council reviewed ORS State Plan updates (Noted in the State Plan Committee report).
- \* Position letter to the Governor's Commission on Disabilities to support changes to the Open Meetings regulations so that virtual meetings could continue to be available.

We continue to promote the diversity, content expertise, and experiences that Council members have and to foster each member to advocate and share their voice as representatives for supporting persons with disabilities.

## **Acknowledgments**

Each year the Council acknowledges the work of outstanding individuals or organizations in providing or advocating for services to those with disabilities within the State of Rhode Island. During our May meeting we honored Catherine Sansonetti and Ron Racine for their years of dedication to the State Rehabilitation Council's mission.

We want to thank ORS and their vendors publicly for their contributions to the growth of our consumers and to let you know your voices and enthusiasm continue to exemplify the best of vocational rehabilitation work in R.I.

## Looking Ahead to What's Next

The Council will continue to fulfill its role by monitoring the progress that the State of Rhode Island and ORS are making in fulfilling its responsibilities under the 2014 Rhode Island vs. US DOJ Consent Decree.

We continue to support ORS as it works to assist with the employment needs of Rhode Islanders with disabilities.

We are honored to serve as the Co-chairs of the SRC, and excited about the work in the year ahead. It is important to recognize the countless volunteer hours Rhode Island SRC members complete throughout the year to achieve the Council's goals.

Thank you to each member for your valued contributions!

Respectfully Submitted,

Melissa Brusso  
Jane Slade  
SRC Co-Chairs

### 2023 Schedule

**1.30.2023** 4:00 PM – 6:00 PM @ The Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities (ROOM 105)

**3.27.2023** 4:00 PM – 6:00 PM @ The Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities (ROOM 105)

**5.8.2023** 8:30 AM – 11:00 AM @ The Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities (ROOM 105)



*Melissa Brusso, Ronald Racine, Jane Slade*

## Membership Training Sub-Committee

The Membership Training Committee had a difficult year due to COVID-19 but is still developing a mentorship program for new members. We will use this program to acquaint new members with the work of the SRC and to assist them in becoming fully engaged in our committee work through advocacy in their communities and support of ORS' initiatives. A training event is also in the works to refresh the work of Council members.

The Membership Training Sub-Committee is charged with the interviewing, orientation, and training of new members including disseminating new materials and providing an annual training event in partnership with ORS. A mentoring program is available to new members for their first year on the Council.

### **The Committee maintains four core goals:**

- \* Maintaining an annual training event - Ensure that all new and existing members have participated in the annual training seminar.
- \* Disseminate a membership package to all members, offering materials that clearly state the SRC mission, vision, responsibilities and contact information along with other relevant materials.

*Respectfully Submitted,*

*Melissa Brusso,  
Chair Membership Training Committee*

- \* Sustaining ongoing efforts toward active recruitment of qualified individuals to its membership. Candidates must represent the interests of the stakeholders and represent a diverse composition that reflects the needs of the populations served, while meeting the federal requirements. SRC members represent people with disabilities, advocates and family members, employers, and rehabilitation and education professionals. Recruitment of new members is an ongoing, shared responsibility of ALL council members.
- \* Implement a mentoring program - The committee will pair new members with experienced members to answer any questions and clarify responsibilities and expectations of the council for at least one year.

### **Committee accomplishments:**

- \* Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the Committee did not hold a large training event this year.
- \* The mentoring program will be available to all new members.
- \* The responsibility of current SRC members and especially the training Committee is to recruit new members.

## State Plan, Policy, and Quality Assurance Committee

The State Plan, Policy, and Quality Assurance Committee of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) leads the SRC to provide meaningful comment and feedback to ORS. The committee leads the review of the quality of ORS service delivery to ORS customers by engaging in comment on plans and policies, the Comprehensive Needs Assessment, and the vocational rehabilitation portion of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Combined State Plan.

This year, the Committee's work took place via Zoom due to continued issues related to the pandemic and lack of in-person meeting opportunities. The committee helped to formulate a position letter to the Governor's Commission on Disabilities to support changes to the Open Meetings regulations so that virtual meetings could continue to be available. Although the committee did not meet in person, we enjoyed being able to meet with the full Council at the May 2022 breakfast meeting.

During the last few years, the committee's focus was working with ORS to produce a monthly survey to consumers. This data was used as part of ORS's Comprehensive Needs Assessment and was incorporated into the State Plan update.

*Respectfully Submitted,*

*Catherine Sansonetti, Chair*

*State Plan, Policy, and Quality Assurance Committee*

In the later part of this year, the SRC received the ORS State Plan updates. We initially began to plan the work. This process resulted in engaging more Council members to participate in the work of the State Plan to capture the diverse voices that could bring different perspectives and provide meaningful feedback to ORS. The initial stages of planning consisted of receipt of the updates to the state plan from ORS. We then requested that ORS meet with the members of our Council to explain the changes in each section. ORS did meet with us virtually and provided a helpful framework and highlighted important issues. The Council found this to be immensely helpful. Our work continued through the process until we submitted our comments to ORS.

This year, ORS is beginning to revise their agency policies and will be meeting with the committee to go over the changes. We look forward to providing meaningful comments regarding the upcoming policy changes. We also look forward to learning more about the ORS service delivery system post-pandemic. We understand from ORS that more individuals are seeking to return to work and utilize ORS services compared to during the pandemic when ORS experienced a decline in applications, something that was also noted to be a national trend. This is slowly recovering as more individuals are feeling enthusiastic about entry or re-entry to the workforce. The committee looks forward to continued updates.

# State Rehabilitation Council Members

**Melissa D. Brusso is a Co-Chair of the Council and the Chair of the Membership Training Committee.** She sits on the Council as a representative of a Disability Advocacy Group representing individuals with physical, cognitive, sensory, or mental disabilities who have difficulty in representing themselves or are unable due to their disabilities to represent themselves. She is an Educational Advocate at the Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities at Rhode Island College. She has worked in educational advocacy for a total of sixteen years, first with the Office of the Child Advocate and the Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities, and later with Justice Resource Institute in Massachusetts. She has worked in adult education and ESL at Dorcas International Institute of RI, helping recently resettled refugee students and other newcomers through the process of beginning their English education. She is appointed by the RI Department of Education to make educational decisions for children and youth in foster care throughout Rhode Island. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Providence College, and a Master's degree from Rhode Island College.

**Jane Slade is a Co-Chair of the Council.** Jane has been employed as the State Transition Coordinator with the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), Office of Student, Community and Academic Supports (OSCAS) since June 2011. Core functions of this office include Special Education policy/program development and oversight; IDEA State Performance Plan Indicators; Liaison to School Support System visits; State Councils and RIDE statewide developmental work. Ms. Slade's additional focus area responsibilities include Secondary Transition; Secondary Reform/Proficiency-Based Graduation Requirements (PBGR); Post-secondary Outcomes; Interagency/Adult Services, and is the Chair of the RI Transition Council. Prior to coming to the State Department of Education, she served as the Northern RI Regional Transition Coordinator, serving youth, parents, and professionals in secondary Transition. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Rhode Island and a Master's degree from Assumption College. She is also a Certified Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor. She has been a member of the State Rehabilitation Council for six years and is currently a Co-chair.

**Catherine Sansonetti, Esq., is the Vice-Chair of the Council and the Chair of the State Plan, Policy, and Quality Assurance Committee.** She sits on the Council as the current designee for Morna Murray, Executive Director of Disability Rights Rhode Island, representing the Client Assistance Program established under section 732 of this title under 43 CFR part 370. Catherine is a Managing Attorney at Disability Rights Rhode Island and has been on the Council for four terms. She brings more than twenty years of experience as an advocate for people with disabilities to her work on the Council. During her tenure, she also served as Secretary of the Council, and was on the Transportation ad hoc Committee. She has been the driving force behind the State Plan, Policy, and Quality Assurance Committee for all the years of her service on the Council. She was recognized twice for her work on the Council and received the First Outstanding Service Award from the Council in 2018. Catherine actively works on the Consumer Satisfaction Surveys and the Comprehensive Needs Assessments, and on the State Plan and other policy matters.

**Cathy Andreozzi** sits on the Council first and foremost as a parent of a medically fragile disabled child with disabilities. In addition to personal advocacy for those with disabilities, she has served as a Board Member for Sergeant Rehabilitation Center and the Brain Injury Association of Rhode Island. Through her position as a Board Member and Event Chair for Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD RI), she became a sought-after speaker for leveling the playing field. Professionally, she is the President of Home Health Solutions, a home-based health care agency and Founder of the Tori Lynn Andreozzi Foundation, a nonprofit charitable organization. She is also sponsor and co-founder of DanceAbility, a complimentary wheelchair ballroom dance program.

**Kate McCarthy-Barnett** is on the State Plan, Policy and Quality Assurance Committee. She brings over 25 years of strategic leadership and advocacy across local, national, and global disability and civil rights initiatives. Professionally, she works for the US Department of Homeland Security Federal Emergency Management Agency where she leads the transformation to integrate the needs of people with disabilities into all aspects of emergency management throughout New England. She has led disability response operations for over 40 federally-declared natural disasters and man-made disasters. Dr. McCarthy-Barnett is active on numerous committees and initiatives at the state and national level focused on setting policy for individuals with disabilities.

**Jennifer Doucette** sits on the Council representing a Community Rehabilitation Provider. She is the Regional Transition Coordinator for the Northern Region of Rhode Island, and her Center of Excellence is Career and Technical Education for students with disabilities. Additionally, Jennifer is the Director of Regional Transition at West Bay Collaborative, overseeing transition and vocational programming for the Northern region. Prior to her role as Regional Transition Coordinator, she was the Vocational Services Coordinator and Vocational Evaluator at West Bay Collaborative where she provided a variety of Office of Rehabilitation funded services to youth in transition and young adults including Pre-Employment Transition Services. Jennifer has a Master's degree in Rehabilitation Counseling from Salve Regina University.

**Keri Rossi-D'entremont** - N/A

**Barbara Fernandez** is the Secretary of the Council and sits on the State Plan, Policy, and Quality Assurance Committee. She is a bilingual legal advocate at Disability Rights Rhode Island. She works primarily on the Client Assistance Program (CAP) and on Protection and Advocacy for Voting Access (PAVA). Barbara also assists in the Rep Payee Review program and is PABSS program trained. Before joining DRRI, Barbara worked as a paralegal in consumer litigation and as a residential manager for individuals with developmental disabilities. A Providence native, Barbara has a strong connection to the community and aims to educate and assist the underserved through advocacy.

**Anne Fartura** is on the State Plan, Policy, and Quality Assurance Committee. She sits on the Council representing the Parent Training and Information Center established pursuant to Section 1431(e)(1) of Title 20. Anne joined the RI Parent Information Network (RIPIN) team in 2010 and serves as a program supervisor. Much of her work is with students with disabilities transitioning from school to adulthood. Her committee work includes representing RIPIN at Rhode Island's State Transition Council and the State Rehabilitation Council.

**Nina Fiasconaro** is on the State Plan, Policy, and Quality Assurance Committee. She is part of the Council representing a parent of a highly involved son with disabilities. She started advocating for the disabled and participating on various committees at Jawonio, which was the UCP of Rockland NY and CPW, which was the UCP for Westchester NY. From 2010 to 2016, she was on the Board of Directors and was the Director of Development for The Miracle League of Westchester helping develop and run after-school programs for children with disabilities. Also, during that period, she participated on the Family Support Services Advisory Council of Westchester NY and was instrumental in overseeing a \$6 million dollar budget for respite programs in Westchester NY. After moving to Rhode Island, she became a Realtor with RE/MAX FLAGSHIP and is a Children's Miracle Network Hospital Agent. She is also heavily involved with Meeting Street School and participates on diverse levels and contributes to the Parent Advisory Board. She was part of BHDDH's Barriers Workgroup on restructuring the consent decree. Currently she is the founder and director of 401 A League of Our Own, an adaptive Buddy Ball League in Rhode Island.

**Tracey Cunningham-Martins** has spent 30+ years in the field of day and supported employment for individuals served by multiple state departments including The Division of Developmental Disabilities, The Department of Veterans Affairs, The Department of Transitional Services, various state Vocational Rehabilitation agencies, and Ticket to Work. She has been successful in assisting organizations in transformation projects and building successful leadership teams, in multiple states until settling in Rhode Island where she served as the Associate Director of Employment at Behavioral Health Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals before becoming the CEO/President at Accesspoint Rhode Island. She is also an active member of multiple committees including the Institute of Community Inclusion Advisory Board in Boston, the RI Governor's Commission on Disabilities- employment committee, and the Governors Workforce Board Career Pathways Advisory Committee. She is also a recent graduate of Salve Regina University's Dual Master's Program in Rehabilitation Counseling and Innovation and Strategic Management which has fueled her enthusiasm for promoting system change in Rhode Island.

**Nicole Rico Serrano** is a member of the State Plan, Policy, and Quality Assurance Committee. She sits on the Council representing American Indian VR program. She is the Project Director for the Mashantucket Tribal Nation Rehabilitation Program in Mashantucket, CT. She has worked in the tribal communities of RI and CT for the past eleven years as a vocational rehabilitation counselor for Mashantucket. Nicole is a Narragansett tribal member and is committed to advocating on behalf of the tribal communities to bring cultural awareness and Indigenous representation to both RI and CT. She has a bachelor's degree in International Relations and Spanish and a Master's degree in Elementary Education.

**Christine Yankee** is a member of the State Plan, Policy, and Quality Assurance Committee. She sits on the Council representing a Community Rehabilitation Program Service Provider and individuals with barriers to employment. Christine is the Vice President of Program Services at Goodwill of Southern New England. She brings over twenty-five years of experience in the areas of workforce development, adult education, and transition services for youth and adults with and without disabilities. Her committee work includes representing Goodwill at the RI Workforce Alliance Meeting, and as a Providence/Cranston Workforce Development board member.

### ***Vocational Rehabilitation Services***

**Ex-officio Joseph Murphy, Associate Director, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)**, Joe has been employed by ORS for 21 years and was recently named Associate Director of ORS in April 2022. He has worked as a VR Counselor, Transition Counselor, Regional Supervisor, Assistant Administrator and Administrator. Joe has a Master's Degree in Rehabilitation Counseling from Assumption College and has been a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor since 2000 and a Certified Employment Support Professional since 2015. Before coming to ORS, Joe worked in the Vocational Rehabilitation field at a community mental health center for 4 years and then at a school for students with disabilities for another 4 years.

**Natalia Montoya, M.A., CRC**, is a member of the State Plan, Policy, and Quality Assurance Committee. She sits on the Council as Liaison for the Office of Rehabilitation Services as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor with knowledge of and experience with Vocational Programs and community services for ORS participants. Natalia is a VRC II in the South County Region and has been working for the Office of Rehabilitation Services since 2014 serving the adult population and youth in transition. In addition to her work with the Council, is also the liaison to North Kingstown High School, South Kingstown High School, Bradley School South County, South County Chamber of Commerce, Galilee Mission Liaison, College Unbound Liaison, South Shore Mental Health, and she is a member of the BEST (Business Engagement Specialist Team) at ORS.

**Karen Davis** has been employed by ORS for 18 years and was promoted to the VR Administrator position in May 2022. While at ORS, she has worked as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor I, Supervisor, and Assistant Administrator for the Supported Employment Program. She has a Master's Degree in Rehabilitation Counseling and is a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor. Before coming to ORS, she worked in Private Rehabilitation for 16 years, working with individuals who have been injured at work.

**Laurie DiOrio**, Administrator of Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired

**Linda Deschenes**, Assistant Administrator of Operations

**John Valentine**, Strategic Planning Supervisor

**Nancy Baker**, SRC Staff/Contact

# State Rehabilitation Council Members Annual Meeting



*Back: John Valentine, Jane Slade, Christine Yankee, Ronald Racine, Linda Deschenes, Nancy Baker, Barbara Hernandez, Catherine Sansonetti*

*Front: Cathy Andreozzi, Anne Fartura, Natalia Montoya, Jennifer Doucette, Melissa Brusso, Regina Connor, Judi Drew*



## RISRC Partnership with National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils

The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) is an active long-time member of the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC). The NCSRC strives to

cultivate the strengths and necessary expertise of local SRCs, Increase the capacity of SRCs through education & training to become effective partners in the vocational rehabilitation (VR) program. As each SRC maintains their respective individuality, the NCSRC provides a national resource to those Councils who may need to connect with a peer state on issues along with providing a mechanism for training with subject matter experts.

### **NCSRC Mission**

On behalf of people with disabilities, our national membership coalition will advocate for and work in partnership with the national public vocational rehabilitation system's continual quest for excellence.

### **NCSRC Vision**

NCSRC will be the premiere national organization of the consumer voice to enhance the employment opportunities of persons with disabilities through the public vocational rehabilitation system.

### **NCSRC Core Values**

*Integrity* - We are honest and straightforward in all that we do. We treat everyone with dignity and respect. We act responsibly with resources entrusted to us. We are accountable and act in accordance with these values.

*Commitment* - We support the full implementation and enforcement of disability non-discrimination laws, particularly the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended and the American with Disabilities Act of 1990.

*Excellence* - We trust that customers of public vocational rehabilitation will be empowered to make choices which lead to ultimate independence.

*Advocacy* - We will work to educate and inform the public and government policy makers regarding issues affecting people with disabilities

*Diversity* - We will uphold a broad definition of diversity that honors and appreciates disability alongside race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, and religion as an integral part of the human experience.

*Leadership* - We will foster leadership among people with disabilities that upholds excellence, quality and inclusive opportunities.

*Partnership* - We will promote a positive collaboration with state and non-governmental agencies to enhance meaningful and sustainable employment for people with disabilities.

*Teamwork* - We are committed to a partnership based on a spirit of trust and cooperation with Vocational Rehabilitation Administrators and staff so that collaborative efforts will benefit from the NCSRC customer voice.

*Culture* - We support a public vocational rehabilitation service system that is structured in a manner that reflects the social, political, historic, and economic experience of disability.

*Communication* - We value effective communication through appropriate formats.

The NCSRC currently consists of 53 SRCs of states and territories that provide public VR services. In addition to conference calls every two months, the NCSRC hosts two training conferences each year that coincide with the national meetings of the Council of State Administrators for Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) in collaboration with the Rehabilitation Services.

For more information about the NCSRC, please go to <https://ncsrc.net>.





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