Hybrid Meeting

Washington State Rehabilitation Council

WSRC QUARTERLY MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, August 13, 2026
9:00am-3:30pm

Members Present: Michele Stelovich, Council Chair, Labor Representative, Everett
Jennifer Bean, Council Vice Chair, Client Assistance Program, Bellingham
Jill McCormick, Parent Advocate Representative, Puyallup
Jennifer Tabiando, CRP Representative, Lynnwood
Liz Gallagher, Workforce Board Representative, Lacey
Jana Finkbonner, Tribal VR Representative, Bellingham
Aimee Elber, Disability Advocacy Representative, Spokane
Alexandra Toney, OSPI Representative, Olympia
Matt Newton, Business Representative, Tacoma
Pablo Villarreal, DVR Interim Director, Ex-Officio, Olympia
Verena Strydom, DVR Counselor Representative, Ex-Officio, Kirkland

Members Absent: Noelle Green, Recipient of Services Representative, Olympia
Katrina Simmons, Recipient of Services Representative, Tacoma
Edward Nicholson, Business Representative, Vancouver

Council Staff: Shelby Satko, WSRC Executive Director, Olympia
Jolie Ramsey, WSRC Executive Assistant, Olympia

Visitors:

Aaron Dickson, Ann Martin, Angela Merritt, Angela Mary Crago, Christina Frye, Dave Stewart, Doug Burkhalter, Ben Martin, Chrissy Dahlgren, Elizabeth Gordon, Eliza Lester, Hayley Tresenriter, Jamie Grund, Janet Vaupel, Jeannine Chandler, Jessica Bell, Joshua Stevens, Kristin Nguyen, Lauren Peterson, Lesa Dunphy, Lucinda Heidel, Mandy Kipfer, Mari Heusman, Megan Grundbrecher, Rebecca Jansson, Richard Wilson, Robb St. Lawrence, Sam Blazina, Sarah Lowes, Shawn Walsworth, Sonya Sanders, Steven Potter, Tammy Bowen, Tricia Wiltse, Zandra Leitch

Call to Order— Meeting called to order at 9:03am by Michele Stelovich, Council Chair

Executive Committee

Motion: Approval of May 2026 quarterly meeting minutes
No edits, no abstentions. **APPROVED**

DVR Interim Director Updates

DVR Updates

- Continuing to focus on being an employer of choice by supporting staff training and development.
- DVR finalized the State Plan amendment.
- Holding monthly business reviews: reviewing performance measures, setting improvement goals.
- Focusing on measures that matter
    - Quality jobs for participants
    - Supporting staff to engage with employers to develop work-based learning opportunities.
- Interim Director is attending the DSHS Secretary cabinet meetings.
- DVR has several work groups in progress. Collaborations between IT, field staff, leadership, etc. Using a matrix to track each project.
- Staffing
    - Need for a data analyst to fill Kristina Zawizsa's position.
- Order of Selection
    - DVR began releasing participants June 9th, next release was Aug. 3rd and planning on another release on Sept. 1st. Currently approximately 2,000 on the priority 1 category on the waitlist, and 4,000 individuals in total. DVR is tracking attrition rates.

Federal Updates

- Assured there will be no changes to DVR program.
- Dept of Health and Human Services is providing support to Dept of Education.
- HR-1 and SNAP work requirements
    - Jana asked what communication has been done with DVR participants about work requirements. Pablo said that no communication has been done so far, and that we need to. Pablo will connect with the Economic Services Administration (ESA) to get clarification on certain exemptions, whether being on the waitlist affects eligibility, etc.
    - Communication with customers would be a great topic for a DVR all-staff meeting. Babs Roberts from ESA could give a presentation.
    - Liz Gallagher said that ESA has sent out letters and emails to those impacted, primarily able bodied adults with dependents (ABAWD). Being eligible for DVR does not necessarily make them exempt from work requirements.

State Budget

- Decision packages are due 9/15/26, and DVR has submitted them already.
- Awaiting DSHS budget reduction exercises in anticipation of further reductions. No instructions given yet.

CSAVR

- Organization has experienced recent personnel changes, retirements, and resignments.
- Fall conference will be Oct. 31-Nov. 4.

Fiscal Updates

Proposed Federal Budget FY27

- Eliminates funding for Supported Employment Grant, roughly $400K for DVR and eliminates funding for CAP. DVR has plans to fund CAP if funding source changes. We would still fund supported employment with the VR grant.
- VR grant funding includes the COLA

State Budget

- Working on the biennial 2027-2029 budget
- No decision package yet for DVR
- OFM has clear instructions for policy level funding DPs
- Reduction exercises are anticipated

VR basic support 2025

- Pre-ETS 15% requirement has been met, and on track to fully spend the grant by 9/30.

VR basic support 2026

- Grant award received is $58,938,168
- Fully matched
- Asked for re-allotment funds of $2 million

Reallotment

- We are requesting $2 million
- Not guaranteed
- We will not know until September
- This would increase our Pre-ETS 15% minimum
- We are already requesting $300K for supported employment grant

Pre-ETS staff time trends

- It has greatly increased over the past four years due to improved staff reporting their time spent on Pre-ETS activities. Spending AFPs have increased.
- Services authorized by a VR counselor. This is folks on caseloads.

Travel

- SFY 26 reduced travel expenses.

School to Work

- Participant spend was $1 million in SFY 26 as of 7/31/26.

Wenatchee and Omak Office Listening Session Highlights

Communication

- While a few participants shared that communication with their counselors meets their needs, the majority shared that communication creates substantial barriers with receiving services.

Suggestions for Improvement

- Avoid using jargon with participants
- Improve communication

WSRC Recommendation

- Counselor Reassignment Communication
    - Council submitted letters of recommendation in 2022, 2025, and now advances the recommendation again.
    - DVR must find a solution to this ongoing issue. Council suggestions are:
        - Automate communication
        - Support from Rehabilitation Technicians, add to job duties

Field Services Updates

Case services/Order of Selection

- Significant decrease in intake wait times. All offices are within the 10-day window except for:

Waitlist Management

- Reviewed monthly, decide how many to release upon review of budget and spending trends.
- Average caseload size by region
    - Region 1: 51
    - Region 2: 57
    - Region 3: 59
- Focusing on improving communication

Intake Improvement Project

- Clarify what DVR does and does not do. Make expectations clear upon the intake, then they can make an informed decision whether to move forward with DVR.
- Discuss their goals
- Prioritizing in-person appointments

IPE Timeliness Project update

- Average of 44 days to plan
- In Region 1, 96% of plans are done within 90 days
- Power BI reports helping assist case management.

Business Engagement

- Working to improve integration with the rest of the WorkSource system
- Partnering with Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center (VR-TAC).
    - WA is the pilot state of this project.
- How do we improve integration and develop an employment pipeline that is clear for all partners, using each other's resources better.
- Being able to direct folks on the DVR waitlist to other support services is wonderful.
- Next step-follow up in Sept. with all partners.

CRP Contract Compliance

- Provided training to CRPs and VR Supervisors.
- Supervisors working with staff to improve consistency and compliance

CRP Dashboard

- Improve participants' informed choice
- Will be a helpful tool to help participants choose what CRP they want to work with.
- Right now, it's an internal tool that DVR counselors can refer to. Currently it is updated monthly.

Region 1 Updates

Staffing

- Actively hiring for five positions

Challenges

- Ongoing challenge hiring in rural areas. List the job posting 3-7 times before getting a meaningful pool. Staff leave to work for DDA. About 30 intakes scheduled weekly in Spokane.
- Engagement has shifted from in-person to virtual or phone meetings. We're seeing the impact in many ways. In-person contact is valuable to counseling and guidance but can be challenging. Leadership continues to encourage in-person meetings whenever possible.

- A lack of contractors in rural areas continues to be a challenge. DVR staff-delivered services occurring where no contractors provide services.

Successes

- Offices are helping each other to meet caseload's needs.
- Working with Winco in Ellensburg to put together a training and employment program to get jobs with advancement opportunities.
- Region 1 leads the state on Pre-ETS staff time tracking and spending.
- Region 1 has 66% tracked skill gain. Leading the state in that effort.

Pre-ETS

- Serving 2,627 students across the region.
- Majority receive work readiness training, self-advocacy and job exploration services.
- Contractors include Big Bend CC, SkillSource, etc.
- 41 school receive Pre-ETS services in ESD 171

TECH-Prep Research Project, with WSU

- Partner with WSU to provide work-based learning services for students.
- Most students are currently on the DVR waitlist, completing these internships, etc. while they await DVR enrollment.

Wenatchee and Omak Office Updates

- Sandra, RT
    - Serving rural students in Tonasket, Omak, etc. Educating folks about DVR services. Do a lot of outreach, Spanish speaking communication/outreach.
    - Partners with school staff, community partners
    - SkillSource is a key partner.
- Christie, SkillSource and Pre-ETS participant, Russell, shared a success story.
    - Russell participated in the Eco Stewardship program, learning center, work readiness, self-advocacy, life skills, Pre-ETS, paid work experience, classroom workshops, job site tours.
    - He has participated since age 15. Now 21, he is enrolled in Wenatchee CC automotive program.
    - Shared that Pre-ETS helped prepare him. Works as a technician at Wenatchee Power Sports.
- Ansley Caldwell, VRC
    - Visited schools, Special Ed students and Transition students. Built rapport between schools and DVR.
    - Shared a success story about how she supported a woman go from being unhoused at the time of intake, to getting a job with benefits and continues to pursue her vocational goals.
- Carol Tschritter and Maria Perky
    - Shared a success story
    - Having an Independent Living Center in Okanogan County would be so helpful. Right now the closest one is in Ellensburg.
- Laura Hamilton, Wenatchee, and Omak office Supervisor:
    - Strong relationships with DDA and Tribal VR, and with RTC, Sandra Duron

SkillSource Presentation, Lisa Romine and Susan Adams

- 25-40% of students served are on an IEP. WIOA allows to work with 75% students who are "dropouts".
- There has been about a 13-14% decline in entry-level hiring for young workers in AI-exposed occupations since late 2022. It typically takes longer to impact rural areas.
- There is a large small business market in this area.
- Emphasize work readiness activities/programs
- Project experience is a work-based learning experience. Students get to work in community, volunteering in small groups, etc.
- How to engage staff to learn about using AI so that they can teach participants about its use.
- SkillSource is in the process of developing policies about AI use.
- Who at the state level would be available to train and prepare DSHS/DVR staff. Account for risk management, HIPAA considerations.
- Lisa and Susan said that they would share their draft policy on AI with the council.

Public Comment

- Aaron Dickson: Regarding the listening sessions and the Customer Satisfaction Survey, which category is each participant in? How is their experience with DVR correlated to their service category? Perhaps there is a correlation.

Wrap Up Discussion

- Verena Strydom: We have had more conversations about business engagement. A lens of youth entering our systems, and it is important to keep that perspective throughout all our programs and services. Some staff may benefit from more training on co-enrolled cases.
- Ann Martin: The work readiness piece of the SkillSource program is genius. DVR is missing the skill development piece. We do it for youth but not so much for adults.
- Jana Finkbonner: We work with many people who are returning to the workforce after an injury or older adults who have changed careers and have a supervisor who is younger than them.
- Eliza Lester: The earlier announcement of the Colville VRC4 retirement has me thinking about how DVR can better anticipate and prepare for the challenges of recruitment for outstation offices, especially those with staff who have been there for years. I know several staff around the state who have been in their position for a long time, and their retirement and the subsequent vacancy is only inevitable. How can DVR prepare for this? Outstations are hard to recruit for. They tend to be in rural areas that don't easily attract people to move there. This is a trend across the state. No easy solution, just an observation.

Resources from Chat

- Call Center Number for clarification on exemptions and what activities count towards work hours: 1-877-501-2233

Meeting adjourned at 2:50pm