

**Mississippi State Rehabilitation
Council**
2025 Annual Report

In Partnership with



Opportunities for Independence

Office of Vocational Rehabilitation
Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind

2025 SRC Annual Report

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MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF
REHABILITATION SERVICES
Opportunities for Independence

Welcome From The Executive Director
Billy Taylor



***Dear Governor Reeves,
Members of the Mississippi Legislature and
Fellow Mississippians:***

On behalf of the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services' Office of Workforce Development, I thank you for the opportunity to share highlights of our Offices of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind (VRB) through our partnership with the State Rehabilitation Council during Federal Fiscal 2025.

The work of our Vocational Rehabilitation teams and the SRC is vital to carrying out our mission of assisting Mississippians with disabilities to gain/retain employment and to provide appropriate and comprehensive services in a timely and effective manner. We are proud to report that our Vocational Rehabilitation Programs assisted over **14,373** Mississippians with disabilities, helped **3,624** become successfully employed, provided Pre-employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) to **2,958** students, and have **14** partnerships with Pre-ETS providers to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services. We held job fairs in which **95** businesses participated and had 13 Project SEARCH sites operating. We partnered with corporate giants such as Toyota, Teleflex, Fastenal, community colleges, and senior colleges for internship programs and to help meet their hiring needs. We assisted individuals with disabilities and participants in Mississippi State University's Access Program and the University of Mississippi RISE Program.

Our success is to be credited to our outstanding statewide staff here at MDRS. They work hard every day to make a difference in the lives of those we serve and regularly consult with the members of the State Rehabilitation Council as a matter of duty and due diligence.

I thank you for your continued support of our mission and look forward to another year of successful outcomes and life-changing work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Billy Taylor". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Billy Taylor, Executive Director
Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services



Mississippi State Rehabilitation Council Chair
Don Brown

On behalf of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), I am happy to share the annual report of the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services' Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind (OVR/OVRB).

The SRC is a body mandated by The Rehabilitation Act and its resulting regulations at CFR 361. Members described in these regulations represent a broad range of individuals with disabilities across the state, partner agency stakeholders, as well as colleagues from business and industry.

Our mandated functions include:

- Reviewing, analyzing, and advising OVR/OVRB on the performance of their responsibilities related to eligibility and Order of Selection; the extent, scope, and effectiveness of vocational rehabilitation services; and functions that affect the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving employment outcomes
- Partnering with OVR/OVRB in developing goals and priorities; and evaluating the effectiveness in obtaining these goals
- Advising OVR/OVRB in the vocational rehabilitation portion of the Unified State Plan
- Conducting a review and analysis of consumer satisfaction
- Submitting this report and making it available to the public
- Coordinating activities with other named Councils within the state
- Performing other relevant functions which the SRC determines appropriate consistent with the purpose of OVR/OVRB

The Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services' OVR/ OVRB has had strong customer satisfaction ratings in the last year for the services that are provided to the citizens of Mississippi who experience disability; as well as the employment outcomes that are achieved after service provision. Strong collaboration with the business and industry community leads to accomplishments for the citizens served. Lives are made better with employment. Businesses are made stronger by having a source for qualified and job-matched candidates to fill their labor forces. OVR and OVRB services are a great investment, making the state of Mississippi stronger, where all citizens are included.

We hope you will continue to prioritize strong funding of this agency for the 20% required state match to federal funds so that it will have the funding levels to remain an essential Mississippi resource for citizens with disabilities seeking employment. We hope that you prioritize competitive staff salaries, a frequent discussion of the SRC, to ensure that highly skilled professionals continue to choose MDRS OVR and OVRB as their employer.

The SRC is happy to continue to advise the agency regarding the individual stakeholder groups who we represent.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Donald G. Brown".

Donald G. Brown, Chairman
State Rehabilitation Council

State Rehabilitation Council Membership

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Pat Fontaine, Executive Director MS Hospitality and Restaurant Association 11 Northtown Dr. Ste 125; Jackson, MS 39211 PH: 601-420-4210 Email: patfontaine@msra.org	Rebecca Treadway, Executive Director The Arc of Northwest Mississippi 6545 Elmore Road, Southaven, MS 38671 PH: 662-510-8989; Cell: 901-907-9041 Email: rebecca@thearcnwms.org
Kenneth Hudson, MDRS VRB Counselor MS. Department of Rehabilitation Services - OVRB Addie McBryde Rehabilitation Center for the Blind 2550 Peachtree Street, ext., Jackson, MS 39216 Mailing Address: P.O. Box 5314, Jackson, MS 39296-5314 PH: 601-987-7401; 800-443-1000 Email: khudson@MDRS.ms.gov	Beth Robertson, Executive Coordinator for Transition USM Institute for Disabilities Studies 730 East Beach Boulevard Long Beach, MS 39560 228-214-3422 or 601-385-1146 Email: Beth.Robertson@usm.edu

The public is always invited to attend the quarterly State Rehabilitation Council Meetings. Meeting locations, dates and times are posted at www.MDRS.ms.gov, www.MDRS.ms.gov/SRC, and the NFB Newsline.

2025 Mississippi State Rehabilitation Council Activities

2025 Mississippi - State Rehabilitation Council Activity Report

The Mississippi State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) held four (4) quarterly meetings during the Federal Fiscal Year spanning October 1, 2024, to September 30, 2025. Utilizing in-person meetings, Microsoft Teams, and teleconferencing, members were able to attend each quarterly meeting. During each meeting, everyone was welcomed, introductions were made, and guests were recognized. Agenda topics were centered around the SRC Functions and provided by the Offices of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) and Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind (OVRB). The State Rehabilitation Council reviewed and provided input at each meeting on selected topics related to:

- ◆ Reviewing, analyzing, and advising OVR/OVRB on the performance of their responsibilities related to eligibility and Order of Selection; the extent, scope, and effectiveness of vocational rehabilitation services; and functions that affect the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving employment outcomes.
- ◆ Partnering with OVR/OVRB in developing goals and priorities and evaluating the effectiveness in obtaining these goals.
- ◆ Advising OVR/OVRB in the vocational rehabilitation portion of the Unified State Plan.
- ◆ Conducting a review and analysis of consumer satisfaction, including a quarterly report from the Client Assistance Program (CAP) as well as a report of Due Process Hearings
- ◆ Submitting the SRC Annual Report and making it available to the public.
- ◆ Coordinating activities with other named Councils within the state, with a specific agenda item quarterly for a report from the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC).
- ◆ Performing other relevant functions, the SRC determines appropriate consistency with the purpose of OVR/OVRB.
- ◆ The integral responsibility of the Council is to have active participation by responding formally to questionnaires, participating in NCSRC training, asking questions, and providing input reflective of the interest of the stakeholder groups represented.

December 13, 2024, Quarterly Meeting

SRC Chair: Don Brown welcomed everyone to the 4th quarterly meeting of the State Rehabilitation. All attendees were given an opportunity to provide their introductions, and all received materials that were going to be covered via email prior to the meeting. A motion was made by Edwin Butler and was seconded by Pat Fontaine to accept the minutes from the prior meetings. Mary Meruvia Lundy commented that the prior minutes from June and October had typos, and Pshon Barrett's name was misspelled. All were in favor of accepting the minutes with these corrections.

MDRS Executive Director: Samandra Murphy, MDRS Chief of Staff, attended on behalf of Executive Director Billy Taylor and shared several updates. She announced that Dr. Jennifer Jackson has been officially appointed as VR Director following a thorough selection process, and MDRS is pleased with the progress and leadership in VR. All Business Development, policy and training, and Project SEARCH staff have now been placed under the VR Director's authority. Upcoming policy changes, including post-secondary education policy, will continue to be reviewed with stakeholder input. RSA has also scheduled a monitoring visit for May 6–8 and may contact SRC members. No additional comments were provided.

Client Assistance Program: Pshon Barrett introduced herself as the newly designated CAP representative to the SRC and shared her background in ADA enforcement as a former assistant U.S. attorney. She described CAP's role as helping clients understand their rights and responsibilities while advocating for client-centered and system-level improvements within VR.

Since assuming the role, Ms. Barrett has conducted outreach and training with consumers, providers, and VR staff; developed a new brochure; begun reviewing VR regulations; and started building procedures, staffing, and an advisory committee. CAP has resolved two cases and has one pending. She is coordinating with Dr. Jackson on policy training and counselor education and offered CAP's support in addressing consumer satisfaction survey feedback.

Due Process Hearings last Quarter: Dr. Jackson reported that there were no due process hearings. One mediation with the Office of Civil Rights resulted in an agreement with the consumer's guardian, which is currently being implemented. One appeal request is pending and has not reached the due process stage. Another mediation, assisted by Pshon Barrett, concluded with a finding of ineligibility for VR services, and no appeal was filed.

OVR Program: Dr. Jennifer Jackson introduced her background in special education, Project SEARCH, and autism services, emphasizing her strong personal and professional commitment to individuals with disabilities. She then presented the OVR report, noting solid progress toward annual goals. Overall, OVR has achieved 55% of its IPE goal, completing 2,343 of 4,270 IPEs, with several districts already at or above 50%. OVR is serving 10,511 individuals statewide, including Project SEARCH students. Totals include 2,319 potentially eligible individuals, 2,282 transition students, and 1,334 successfully rehabilitated clients, representing 55% of the annual rehabilitation goal. New applications total 3,525, with 10,061 active cases. Pre-ETS participation increased to 3,704 students following new referral procedures.

Dr. Jackson also reported that Business Development has been moved back under OVR to improve coordination and continuity, with staffing adjustments made to avoid service disruptions. She emphasized her focus on continuity of care by minimizing case handoffs and ensuring consistent support for clients.

As part of developing and reviewing state goals and priorities, Dr. Jackson provided an update on efforts to streamline policies and procedures. Members received a report titled "Post Secondary Education and Training" from the Resource Guide. Discussion centered on policies affecting students with outstanding or defaulted student loans. Dr. Jackson explained that OVR currently handles these situations on a case-by-case basis and is reviewing existing language to provide clearer guidance. She has consulted with RSA and reviewed policies from other states and is evaluating potential revisions to better address these concerns.

OVRB Program Report: Dorothy Young provided updates on OVRB programs, noting that written reports will be distributed later. At the EMERGE Center, 14 clients are currently in training, with 4 residing in on-site apartments as part of a 6–9-month residential program supported by specialized instructors and transportation services. The center also operates a successful day program for individuals age 55 and older. OVRB has hired a new EMERGE Center director, Dean Georgiev, bringing extensive experience in structured discovery and adaptive technology, and has filled key instructor positions with two certified staff beginning in January 2024.

OVRB announced a six-month community update event at the EMERGE Center on January 17, 2024, and plans to promote the program at future conferences. The Addie McBryde Center has served 32 clients year to date; efforts are underway to increase referrals statewide by adding referral goals to counselor performance plans.

Ms. Young also shared that she will serve as President of the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind beginning January 2025. Current OVRB service numbers include 1,363 consumers served, 218 new applications, 182 plans written, 1,170 active cases, and 116 employment outcomes with an average hourly wage of \$18.56.

Consumer Satisfaction Review:

- **Consumer Satisfaction Survey (July 2024 - September 2024):** Charles Fairley emphasized that the consumer satisfaction survey is a key tool for improving services and outreach, noting the importance of delivering a clear, consistent message so consumers and families better understand available services. He summarized results from the non-blind consumer survey across all 10 districts, as provided in the 4th quarter 2023–2024 report.

Overall ratings were very strong: application experience (4.82), service planning (4.83), services received (4.81), employment outcomes (4.82), and support from other agencies (4.5). Employer-provided benefits received a lower rating (4.30), reflecting a nationwide challenge discussed with the Department of Labor. Mr. Fairley noted that, despite staffing vacancies and turnover, the results are encouraging and expected to improve further with added service providers and continued focus on areas for improvement.

- **Program Evaluation Survey:** Kellie Rushing thanked the SRC for their dedication to compliance and client care. She reported on open active cases in OVR Districts 3 and 4, noting outreach efforts: District 3 reached 199 of 785 clients (39 employed) and District 4 reached 280 of 847 clients (44 employed). Overall satisfaction ratings were 3.07 (D3) and 3.42 (D4), with employment satisfaction averages of 3.13 (D3) and 3.89 (D4). Client feedback was generally positive in both districts.

Rushing highlighted the Program Integrity initiative, which uses auditor feedback and case reviews to identify counselor strengths and areas for improvement. A statewide audit is nearly complete, with only District 3 remaining; results will be reviewed with Dr. Jackson and Ms. Young to identify trends and improvement areas.

Regarding low survey response rates (25% in D3, 33% in D4), she noted challenges and discussed strategies to improve participation, including leaving voicemails, using consistent questions, displaying MDRS on caller ID, sending survey links via text, and informing consumers about upcoming surveys during initial case development.

Nominations Committee: Don Brown passed the chairmanship to Pat Fontaine, recommending the committee be expanded beyond one member. The vote was unanimous. A full committee roster will be updated and shared.

Budget Committee: Rebecca Treadway was absent and the report was tabled. Mary Meruvia suggested funding a dedicated SRC liaison to ensure timely minutes, action items, and survey responses, and to create an SRC Teams page for documents. Dorothy Young confirmed Leigh Cone will serve as the dedicated SRC liaison and will coordinate follow-ups and manage the Teams page.

Bylaws Committee: Pablo Diaz was absent. Don Brown noted minor bylaw changes that were discussed previously and will follow up with the committee to ensure completion promptly.

SRC Orientation Committee: Orientation Committee: Don Brown and Edwin Butler emphasized revisiting the comprehensive orientation package developed last year and sharing it with new members. They discussed selecting key elements to use, including assigning mentors from OVR, OVRB, or committees to support new members. Leslie Junkin noted that having a mentor would have been very helpful when she joined.

Consumer Satisfaction Survey Committee: Leslie Junkin highlighted gaps in self-advocacy and transition services for students leaving public schools, noting many families are unaware of available services. Dr. Jackson described steps to improve collaboration with schools, including transition assistants, tracking forms, outreach each semester, newsletters, and job extravaganzas. Suggestions included informative videos, community town halls (in-person or via Zoom/Teams), and inclusion of OVR content in quarterly newsletters.

Josh Bower noted that college students must self-identify for services; partnerships and presentations could raise awareness. Edwin Butler emphasized developing a consistent, program-wide tool to measure consumer satisfaction and suggested comparing approaches with other states and national programs. Mary Meruvia recommended sending SRC members to the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils meetings to learn best practices for evaluating consumer satisfaction.

Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) Report: Mike Duke reported that the SILC met on December 12th for training with the Administration for Community Living (ACL). The training, required for temporary approval of their state plan, covered SILC oversight responsibilities, reporting expectations, and key indicators for review. ACL will follow up via email on the topics covered. The session included report hearings and evaluations. This was Mike's second meeting as SILC chairman since June.

Other Action Items: All attendees were asked to submit the survey by Mr. Don Brown. He suggested that we utilize SurveyMonkey in the future.

❖ **Formal SRC Input: Responses to Questionnaires - December 2024 Meeting**

Q1: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, what further input do you have for VR/VRB regarding the extent, scope, effectiveness of services provided; and functions performed by the Designated State Unit (DSU) that affect or potentially affect the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving employment outcomes?

- 1) More community awareness about VR/VRB
- 2) Great chance of living a self,- efficient life
- 3) After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, the extent, scope, and effectiveness of services provided seem to be satisfactory. Striving for improvement is always desired.
- 4) None
- 5) N/A
- 6) There needs to be adequate accommodations for MDRS employees with disabilities as this will aid in more effective performance. Some offices are not accommodating to all MDRS employees' physical disabilities. Per the spaces being paid to other agencies where MDRS employees are housed, the contract is not being fulfilled. To my understanding, that particular agency housing MDRS employees is suppose to provide certain material, but are not doing so. This may need to be looked into.

Q2: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, the extent, scope, and effectiveness of services provided seem to be satisfactory. Striving for improvement is always desired.

- 1) Respondent skipped this question
- 2) Try to provide a quicker response to the client
- 3) No comment
- 4) None
- 5) N/A
- 6) If a disability is not too significant, why must a MDRS employee have a VR case for accommodations to be provided. Shouldn't it be on the agency to provide the accommodations regardless?

Q3: Having heard this quarter's report on the results of consumer satisfaction surveys, do you have any comments or recommendations for input into the service delivery process?

- 1) None at this time
- 2) I would like to see how the satisfaction reads.
- 3) No comment
- 4) None
- 5) N/A
- 6) Regarding the Consumer Satisfaction Survey, is there a breakdown of how many SE, Transition, Hearing, and General Clients responded?

Q4: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, what further input do you have for the State Plan goals and priorities? What further comment(s) do you have regarding evaluating the effectiveness of the VR/VRB Program in meeting the goals and priorities?

- 1) Would like more discussion
- 2) Nothing at this time, had no
- 3) No comment
- 4) None
- 5) N/A
- 6) Getting accurate number of Consumers from each program that responds to Consumer Survey vs. an overall sum.

Q5: What further input do you have for the establishment of the Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP) for the blind?

- 1) None at this time
- 2) Had no contact with the program
- 3) Giving consumers a choice of services offered is needed.

- 4) None
- 5) N/A
- 6) None

March 14, 2025, Quarterly Meeting

SRC Chairman: Mr. Don Brown welcomed attendees and introduced April Christon, the new Client Services Director for MDRS. Mr. Brown announced that SRC members were invited to attend the statewide OVR/OVRB training in March, with expenses covered by the council. Mr. Brown opened a discussion about the NCSRC national conference and the council approved using SRC funds to send two members, Scott Mullins and Mary Meruvia, to the conference, with Pshon Barrett attending via CAP funds.

MDRS Executive Director: Mr. Billy Taylor reported ongoing uncertainty regarding the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) in Washington, D.C., noting that personnel changes have caused inefficiencies and delayed decision-making, which may necessitate future advocacy efforts, especially given discussions about potentially moving RSA under the Department of Labor. Though Mississippi's RSA monitoring visit has been postponed until September, the agency is remotely sharing documents, and a positive interview with RSA confirmed the State Rehabilitation Council's meaningful involvement in the state plan. On a positive internal note, the agency has successfully resolved a long-standing corrective action plan by finally meeting the 15% spending requirement for Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). While the agency's budget was reduced by 1% in the legislative session, three key requests (restoration of the cut, VR cost-of-living adjustment funding, and a pay increase for personal care attendants) are included in a separate "critical needs" bill, offering hope for funding despite broader legislative delays caused by the debate over eliminating the state income tax. Finally, the agency is prioritizing policy changes to ensure limited vocational rehabilitation funding delivers the most meaningful and lasting impact on client employment outcomes.

Client Assistance Program (CAP): CAP Director Pshon Barrett reported that the program has significantly ramped up outreach efforts since receiving a grant in December, including exhibiting at conferences like the MDE Transition Conference and providing training statewide. The CAP has opened and successfully closed numerous cases, participated in a regional training sponsored by the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN), and held a productive first meeting with VR leadership to discuss policy and case issues. Barrett highlighted that the most frequent concern from consumers, generating numerous calls, is the persistent problem of staff turnover leading to poor communication; specifically, clients are often unaware of who their current counselor is or when their case has been reassigned. The agency acknowledged that staff turnover is the root cause and is focusing on improved hiring, consistent training, and creating a better work environment to increase staff retention and address these critical client concerns.

Due Process Hearing decisions last quarter: Dr. Jennifer Jackson stated there were no due process hearings for the quarter.

OVR Program: Dr. Jennifer Jackson presented several updates. She began with the OVR Management Report. She presented positive performance reports. As of mid-March, OVR has achieved an 88% overall combined goal for Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) completions and for successfully rehabilitated clients, with many districts already surpassing their annual targets. Open cases show high engagement, with 2,578 potentially eligible and 2,625 transition students being served. Furthermore, the agency is no longer under a Corrective Action Plan (CAP) related to Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) spending, and Pre-ETS service numbers have increased significantly due to new referral procedures, growing from 2,930 to 3,704 students served between quarters.

- **Resource Guide Updates and Financial Controls:** Dr. Jackson stated to manage the VR grant effectively, the agency is implementing major changes to the Resource Guide, specifically addressing the overspending in post-secondary education. Expenditures for post-secondary services (like maintenance, training, and graduate school) have risen substantially since FY23. To prevent exhausting the grant and needing to implement an Order of Selection, the agency will re-implement a Financial Needs Analysis for new plans. This analysis, based on federal poverty guidelines, will require financial participation from clients for tuition, housing, and meals,

excluding SSI recipients. Additionally, decisions have been made to not pay for summer school (with exceptions for graduating students) and to only cover meal plan costs, all intended to shift the focus of services to clients with the greatest need.

- **Project SEARCH:** The agency is also revising its funding model for Project SEARCH, noting that Mississippi is the only state where VR serves as the sole funder, despite the high cost of supporting 28 sites. Recognizing that approximately 40% of participants do not achieve employment and following clarification from RSA that VR cannot be the sole funder, the agency will likely implement a set budget reduction for Project SEARCH to ensure the sustainability of funds for individuals with significant disabilities across all VR services.
- **Pre-ETS Service Rate Adjustments:** The agency is initiating a new Request for Quotation (RFQ) process to increase Pre-ETS service rates (including Job Extravaganzas, which will temporarily be scaled back), raising pay to align with rates paid in other states.

OVRB Program Report: Ms. Dorothy Young presented the OVRB Program Report. She highlighted the successful establishment of the EMERGE Center as a new Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP), a distinction recognized by RSA as unique among states due to the rigorous approval process. The center, which recently celebrated its six-month anniversary with a well-attended event featuring the Executive Director, Mr. Billy Taylor, Chief of Staff, Samandra Murphy and the Lieutenant Governor's wife as guest speaker, continues to make strong progress.

Ms. Young reported that the EMERGE Center has served 27 clients to date and, along with the Addie McBride Center, maintains a combined client base of over 1,460 consumers across 82 counties. The center is staffed by a dedicated team that includes Director Dean Georgiev, Braille Instructor, a Home Management Instructor, (a Natchez native and Louisiana Tech graduate who is also a client), a van driver, Administrative Assistant, and Orientation and Mobility Specialist. Additionally, Dr. Schroeder and Dr. Bate, founders of the national Structure Discovery program, serve on smaller contracts in the center.

The EMERGE Center operates with a total salary budget of less than \$300,000, with the largest expense category being staff salaries. Due to challenges in securing a grocery account for the home management program, the center uses a procurement card that was set up with the help of MDRS Finance Director Andy Salin to purchase groceries needed for student instruction. Ms. Young will continue to provide quarterly updates on the center's progress, service changes, and budget, including a detailed RSA-approved budget presentation at the next meeting.

Most current OVRB spending continues to support physical restoration services, focusing on conditions such as blindness and diabetic retinopathy. The EMERGE Center has already attracted interest from other states, including Tennessee and Louisiana, seeking to refer clients once capacity allows. RSA commended Mississippi and the SRC for their active involvement and positive impact in establishing this innovative program.

Ms. Young also provided updates on the program funding and Randolph-Sheppard Program. OVRB is served by 15 counselors and has spent over \$281,826 to date on training and services, with the majority of spending dedicated to physical restoration (over \$715,897). The OVRB is working to establish a unique, military-style Randolph-Sheppard training program at the EMERGE Center, planned for the next year, which will focus on large-scale military dining contracts. This initiative, which other states like Tennessee are looking to model, will involve partnering with facilities such as Keesler Air Force Base to train vendors in contracts and negotiation skills, addressing the need for a succession plan for long-term vendors. The OVRB is also actively engaging with Camp Shelby and RSA attorneys to ensure upcoming food service RFPs include Randolph-Sheppard priority language to direct contracting opportunities back to the program.

Consumer Satisfaction Review:

- **Consumer Satisfaction Survey (Oct.-Dec. 2024):** April Christon presented the first quarter results that included interviews with 253 blind and non-blind consumers, covering about 20% of the population. Clients gave exceptionally positive ratings for their experience, including a 4.75 rating when applying for services, a 4.84 rating while receiving services, and a 4.80 overall rating (on a 5.0 scale). Additionally, 84.6% of respondents reported maintaining successful employment. While overall feedback was highly positive,

highlighting staff helpfulness and kindness, areas for improvement were identified, focusing on the need for better staff knowledge, enhanced customer service skills, and improved communication to counteract the negative effects of staff turnover. The agency plans to address these issues through comprehensive statewide training.

- **Program Evaluation Survey:** Leslie Shake presented the results from VR Districts 5 and 6, which surveyed 161 and 243 active consumers, respectively, with all ratings based on a 4.0 scale. District 5 reported a service section average of 3.08 and an employment section average of 3.33. District 6 reported lower service satisfaction at 2.74 but higher employment satisfaction at 3.92. The primary issue identified in both districts was staff turnover, which caused communication failures and consumer frustration, as clients were often unaware of their new counselor; consequently, improved communication protocols are recommended. Additionally, consistent training for job trainers is advised in District 6.

Nominations Committee: Pat Fontaine stated there was nothing to report today. We do have one member, Josh Bower, whose term will expire June 30th, 2025. Edwin Butler will assist Mr. Fontaine in working on getting the seat filled soon.

Consumer Satisfaction Survey Committee: Ms. Junkin was not in attendance. Ms. Nash was unable to provide updates at this time.

Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) Report: Mike Duke the SILC successfully completed a required training session on December 12th, provided by the Administration for Community Living (ACL). This training was a condition for the temporary approval of the state plan. With the training completed, the state plan was fully approved for the remaining two years of its cycle. SILC is also in the process of preparing its 704 report, which is due at the end of March.

Budget Committee: Rebecca Treadway stated she needed to speak with Dr. Jackson and get all the numbers. Once she gets all the numbers, she can complete the report and get it sent out to everyone. The process is to get the numbers from finance for everything spent in association with the SRC and then she will summarize and categorize the numbers and send it out to everyone.

Bylaws Committee: Mr. Pablo Diaz was not in attendance. Mary Meruvia has served on this committee with Mr. Diaz and gave an update stating that the committee was recommending updates to the bylaws. Some of the updates included VRB not listed at all in the bylaws. They only mention VR. They also wanted to address virtual meetings and were awaiting legal technical assistance to determine if they should be added to the bylaws.

SRC Orientation Committee: Mr. Brown revisited the orientation package and the materials that were provided. At the last meeting, the committee had requested that all materials be sent to them. These materials have now been distributed to all members. Mr. Brown also took the time to re-read all the information and noted that they are now waiting for feedback from the committee members. Additionally, Mary Meruvia mentioned reaching out to members in other states to learn about their orientation processes and agreed to communicate any insights back to the council.

***Additional State Rehabilitation Council Member Activities During 2025
(March 14th, 2025, Quarterly Meeting)***

National Conference Attendance: There was discussion about attendance at the NCSRC national conference. The council has sufficient funds to send two members. Approval was granted for Scott Mullins and Mary Meruvia to attend using SRC funds, while Pshon Barrett will attend using CAP funds.

A motion passed to approve attendance and reimbursement expenses for two members through the SRC budget, with one additional attendee covered by CAP funds.

❖ Formal SRC Input: Responses to Questionnaires - March 2025 Meeting

Q1: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, what further input do you have for VR/VRB regarding the extent, scope, effectiveness of services provided; and functions performed by the Designated State Unit (DSU) that affect or potentially affect the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving employment outcomes?

- 1) Numbers presented indicate goals are being met and people's lives are being improved.
- 2) We are excited about the success of the EMERGE Center. We look forward to and support the changes that Dr. Jackson is implementing.
- 3) Absent from meeting
- 4) I wish more field staff would participate in SRC meetings and provide their feedback.
- 5) The services provided by VR/VRB and the functions provided by the Designated State Unit seem to be effective with assisting individuals who are disabled in achieving employment outcomes.
- 6) It appears all SRC vacancies have been filled and its a good time to continue new member orientation.

Q2: Having heard this quarter's report on the results of consumer satisfaction surveys, do you have any comments or recommendations for input into the service delivery process?

- 1) Satisfaction is high!
- 2) We look forward to see April Christon in her new position. We heard that counselor turnover has been causing difficulties. We look forward to hearing about the results of the new upcoming trainings.
- 3) After hearing the report on the consumer satisfaction survey, the delivery of services is satisfactory with the majority of the consumers surveyed.
- 4) Thanks for making plans for three SRC members to attend the national conference. They should share information with all members. Perhaps sharing their information could be part of new member orientation.

Q3: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, what further input do you have for the State Plan goals and priorities? What further comment(s) do you have in regard to evaluating the effectiveness of the VR/VRB Program in meeting the goals and priorities?

- 1) No comment
- 2) Agree w/implementing the financial needs assessment so that the finite amount of money can be justly allocated.
- 3) It was great to hear about the steps Dr. Jackson is taking to create pride and a love for the job in our counselors.
- 4) No other comment

Q4: What further input do you have for the establishment of the Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP) for the blind?

- 1) Giving consumers of VRB a choice of attending training at a traditional rehabilitation program or a structured rehabilitation program will give consumer the ability to choose the type of training suited to the degree of their visual impairment enhancing their ability to achieve an employment outcome.
- 2) It is great and changing lives for the better – helping visually impaired Mississippian's be most independent.
- 3) Looking forward to implementation of new policy changes that were discussed at the meeting that will make life better for the people served.

April 30th, 2025, Special Called Meeting

The special SRC meeting focused on providing feedback and guidance on MDRS financial needs analysis and policy challenges, particularly the significant overspending in post-secondary education and the reimplementation of the Financial Needs Analysis (FNA) to ensure fiscal sustainability. Updates were given on eligibility, the Order of Selection, post-secondary policy changes, counselor training, and maintaining a list of qualified hearing officers, with SRC members providing input and unanimously approving the FNA and Order of Selection measures.

June 20th, 2025, Quarterly Meeting

SRC Chairman: Mr. Don Brown opened the second quarterly SRC meeting of 2025, confirmed a quorum, and noted that all attendees received the meeting materials. Key agenda adjustments were approved, no public comments were received, and the Council unanimously approved the minutes from the March 14 and April 30 meetings.

MDRS Executive Director: Mr. Taylor thanked the Council and emphasized the growing importance of SRC involvement as MDRS undergoes major policy and financial changes. He explained that MDRS is transitioning from several years of high spending—fueled by COVID-era carryover funds—back to its base \$65 million VR grant, with only about \$25 million available for direct services after required set-asides and administrative costs. Several factors contributed to rapid spending increases, including the elimination of the financial needs analysis, broader eligibility interpretations, high-cost programs like Project SEARCH, and soaring post-secondary education expenses.

To stabilize the budget, MDRS is reinstating financial controls such as district-level budgets, counselor spending limits, peer review of high-cost cases, and revised financial needs analysis procedures, including tuition caps. Mr. Taylor noted that while the adjustment period may be challenging, these steps are essential to restore fiscal sustainability, maintain compliance with federal guidance, and ensure services remain available for individuals with the most significant needs. He closed by reaffirming the agency's commitment to transparency, public input, and SRC partnership as these changes move forward.

Client Assistance Program (CAP): Pshon Barrett presented CAP input, supporting the financial reasoning behind MDRS's proposed policy changes but urging a delay—ideally until January or fall 2026—so families, especially college students, are not disrupted. She noted widespread concern among parents and clients, with most recent CAP inquiries focused on college-related issues. Barrett recommended implementing the reinstated Financial Needs Analysis (FNA) first, evaluating its impact, and determining whether an Order of Selection is necessary before making deeper changes.

Mr. Taylor responded that MDRS will maintain case-by-case discretion for individuals with exceptional needs and is awaiting the federal reallocation process, which may ease budget pressure. He explained the rationale for tuition caps, emphasizing cost-effective service delivery while still allowing exceptions when disability-related needs justify higher-cost programs. Specialized programs like MSU ACCESS and RISE would not be affected by the tuition cap because they fall outside the traditional four-year degree structure.

Discussion highlighted that families fear sudden changes—housing leases, fall tuition deadlines, and the return of the FNA after years without it. Dr. Jackson presented data showing significant savings when shifting early coursework to community colleges. MDRS clarified that while the FNA will apply going forward, many basic services remain exempt. She also explained that the FNA has only just been reinstated and counselors are still adjusting. When asked what would happen without policy changes, Mr. Taylor warned that MDRS could face running out of funds, forcing either a legislative deficit request or shutting down services—both unacceptable outcomes. He stressed that the current level of spending is unsustainable, particularly with 1,600 post-secondary cases, and decisive action is required to avoid a financial crisis. Don Brown acknowledged the difficulty but affirmed the need to prioritize financial stability while continuing to gather public input and refine policy proposals.

Due Process Hearing Decisions last quarter: There were no due process hearings.

OVR Program Report: Dr. Jackson presented OVR management reports covering April 1 through June 16. Current district totals show 2,098 potentially eligible students (2,784 served) and 2,957 transition students (2,407 served). Most districts are meeting or exceeding their IPE goals, with an overall completion rate of 99%—4,209 IPEs achieved toward a yearly goal of 4,270. Only District 5 remains significantly below goal at 64%. In successful rehabilitations, districts collectively reached 3,010, surpassing the annual target of 2,406 by reaching 125% overall. Again, District 5 was the only area below goal at 87%.

Dr. Jackson also reviewed several draft policies, including a new ethical guidance policy designed to ensure all counselors—not just CRC-certified staff—adhere to professional standards. Staff feedback had already led to revisions, and Dorothy Young helped refine the policy to reflect agency-specific VR responsibilities, emphasizing that eligibility determinations must remain with qualified VR counselors. Additional draft updates included formalized procedures for the Project SEARCH program, which will operate at 15 sites largely funded by partner businesses or school districts, as well as an updated financial participation policy aligned with changes to the Financial Needs Assessment. Dr. Jackson invited further questions and feedback from the Council on all draft policies.

OVRB Program Report - Ms. Dorothy Young reported on the two Community Rehabilitation Programs—Addie McBryde and the EMERGE Center—which will now be reviewed quarterly. The Addie McBryde Center is currently serving more than 64 clients and preparing for its college-focused summer program, which supports juniors, seniors, and older participants with campus visits, self-advocacy training, technology instruction, and job-readiness skills. Fourteen students are already enrolled, with capacity for more, and staff and council members praised the center for its strong outcomes and life-changing impact on participants. She also provided updates on the EMERGE Center, which continues developing its facilities, staffing, and programming. The center is launching its first Pre-ETS program and now serves both younger clients and adults 55+ through the Older Blind Day Program. Despite staffing shortages—particularly in southern districts—efforts such as caseload redistribution, resumed hiring, and statewide teamwork have helped maintain services for 1,550 clients. The EMERGE Center’s new ILB program offers intensive 60-hour training to older adults, improving independence and daily living skills, with expanding community partnerships and growing interest from other states. Ms. Young also recognized Eddie Turner from the Randolph-Sheppard Program for receiving a national award.

Consumer Satisfaction Review:

- **Consumer Satisfaction Survey:** Ms. Christon summarized second-quarter consumer satisfaction results, noting high participation (253 consumers) and consistently strong ratings across all service areas, with overall satisfaction averaging between 4.7 and 4.8 out of 5. Despite some isolated concerns about third-party providers, staffing shortages, and follow-up issues, most feedback was highly positive, praising both VR and VRB staff and showing strong employment outcomes for 77.5% of respondents.
- **Program Evaluation Survey:** Kellie Rushing presented the consumer satisfaction survey for open, active cases in Districts 7 and 8, showing moderate satisfaction ratings, stronger results in D7, and challenges in D8 due to staff turnover and limited consumer contact. To improve response rates and accessibility, she introduced a new virtual survey, updated caller ID to display “MDRS,” and proposed moving forward with these tools—with SRC approval—to increase consumer engagement and more accurately capture active-case feedback.

Nominations Committee: Pat Fontaine announced that Josh Bowers’ SRC term ends in June and no new nominations have been submitted. Bowers represented the business, industry, and labor category. Mr. Brown asked if past nomination records were available, but none were found. He encouraged members to suggest potential candidates and noted that a nomination form link can be added to the new SRC website. Mary Meruvia reminded the Council that a majority of SRC members must have a physical or mental disability and recommended seeking nominees through VR or VRB, especially individuals who gained employment or started a business through their services.

Consumer Satisfaction Survey Committee: Ms. Junkin was not in attendance.

Budget Committee: Rebecca Treadway presented the mid-May SRC budget update, outlining spending and remaining balances. She noted that “Travel” covers MDRS employee travel only, while SRC member travel is listed under “Contractual.” MDRS travel had a \$4,114 budget with \$540 remaining, and contractual travel had \$20,000 with \$14,199 left—enough for upcoming conferences. “Commodities,” which includes meeting expenses, had \$1,968 remaining from a \$3,000 budget. The largest category, “SL&G,” had \$25,000 budgeted with \$8,863 left; Andy Salin reminded the Council that survey invoices may still come in later in the year. He also noted the budget resets July 1 and planning for next year is underway.

Rebecca recommended keeping the same budget unless new needs—such as more conference travel—arise. Mr. Salin agreed but mentioned some reimbursements may still be pending. If the Council plans to continue participation in national conferences, a budget increase may be worth considering.

A motion by Rebecca Treadway to maintain the same budget for FY 2025–2026 passed. It was also confirmed that there is no fee to join the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils.

Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) Report: The Council met on June 5th, and the meeting proceeded as

usual. One notable announcement came from MDRS contact Anita Niak, who shared that she will be retiring from the agency. Anita has played a key role in keeping the Council focused and will be greatly missed. Mr. Duke also reported ongoing dialogue between the federal entity, the ACLU, and the SILC regarding clarification requested in their last report. The necessary information has since been provided. Overall, it was a productive meeting with near-full attendance.

SRC Orientation Committee: Ed Butler stressed the importance of the SRC responding quickly to urgent matters and noted that a strong new member orientation supports this. Rapidly equipping new members helps them feel responsible and engaged. Pshon Barrett added that mentoring is also valuable, sharing that she has learned greatly from experienced members and helpful materials.

***Additional State Rehabilitation Council Member Activities During 2025
(June 20th, 2025, Quarterly Meeting)***

NCSRC National Conference Report: Three SRC members attended the NCSRC National Conference, where Mary Meruvia presented key updates on national leadership changes, SRC collaboration efforts, transparency practices, CSAVR priorities, federal funding challenges, consumer satisfaction innovations, and upcoming RSA monitoring. She emphasized the importance of strong SRC functionality, early engagement strategies, and continued participation in national conferences, recommending that at least one member attend annually to support Mississippi's effectiveness and visibility.

Public Hearing Summary: Ms. Dorothy Young reported that the May 9, 2025, public hearing was well-attended, accessible across 11 remote sites and Zoom, and focused on three major topics: reinstating the Financial Needs Analysis, postsecondary/training policy changes, and the potential implementation of an Order of Selection. A total of 18 public questions were addressed, and a detailed summary of all questions and responses is posted on the MDRS website.

Bylaws Committee: Mr. Diaz reported that the SRC will reconvene to review prior bylaw edits and aims to finalize recommendations within the next month, with support from the MDRS attorney to ensure compliance. Feedback from the national conference is also being incorporated. The committee discussed whether meeting videos should be required, linked to minutes, or provided separately. Because managing video content could add workload, the group will revisit the issue and present a formal recommendation at the next meeting. Attorney review is in progress as the bylaws move toward finalization.

MS SRC Website Update: Leigh Cone reported that a new Mississippi SRC website (<https://www.mdrs.ms.gov/src>) has been created to improve accessibility and visibility. The site includes the SRC's vision and will feature agendas, minutes, and other resources. An official email (mississippisrc@mdrs.ms.gov) has been established for public correspondence. Plans include adding a video tab for meeting recordings. Members can review the site, provide feedback, and prepare for group photos to be included. The website is free of charge and enhances the previously minimal webpage.

❖ **Formal SRC Input: Responses to Questionnaires – June 2025 Meeting**

Q1: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, what further input do you have for VR/VRB regarding the extent, scope, effectiveness of services provided; and functions performed by the Designated State Unit (DSU) that affect or potentially affect the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving employment outcomes?

- 1) I am in hopes that VR and VRB will soon be able to drop the financial needs test for some services.
- 2) N/A
- 3) Respondent skipped this question
- 4) In spite of the challenges that have risen and the changes being made *regarding case services*, we as a DSU must continue to provide quality, effective, and timely services to the individuals served so that they can achieve employment outcomes.

Q2: Having heard this quarter's report on the results of consumer satisfaction surveys, do you have any comments or recommendations for input into the service delivery process?

- 1) Satisfaction continues to be high.
- 2) N/A
- 3) I suggest that the survey move more toward an online format to attract younger people's participation. However, all forms of the survey should be made accessible for clients who use magnification or speech software programs.
- 4) Overall, I think this quarter's consumer satisfaction survey results were good. There is always room for improvement in everything. As internal stakeholder, the aim is always to make things better. In saying this, we can always look to build strong Client/Counselor relationships, continued trainings and refreshers, continued assessing and evaluating services, and more networking and building of relationships with stakeholders (internal and external) may all be ways of improving the service delivery process.

Q3: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, what further input do you have for the State Plan goals and priorities? What further comment(s) do you have in regard to evaluating the effectiveness of the VR/VRB Program in meeting the goals and priorities?

- 1) While agreed that Pre ETS is important, I believe leaders should be educated that the mandatory 15% spending should be instead based on need within this priority.
- 2) N/A
- 3) It would be helpful if VR/VRB staff could include more information in their reports about goals and priorities so that the SRC could evaluate whether or not the goals and priorities are being met.
- 4) As it was not deemed in the past, I appreciate the new administration of VR/VRB for being transparent and keeping the SRC members in light of happenings with the agency. Dealing with and resolving matters under advisement *can make a whole lot of difference to a situation.*

Q4: Employee Ethical Guidelines & Practices recent policy changes and updates were discussed during the recent SRC meeting. We welcome any feedback you may have regarding these updates. When submitting your comments, please be sure to reference the specific section(s) your feedback addresses. (Sec. 20.2.1)

- 1) Overall, this addition is EXCELLENT. It should be reviewed in meetings when possible. Professional relationships, 4.8 page 8. I suggest increasing the value to \$25 to include usual "gifts" like t-shirts commemorating events.
- 2) N/A
- 3) Respondent skipped this question
- 4) In life, there is always change. Nothing is always the same. It has always been said "change is inevitable". Although the changes have been overwhelming for most MDRS employees, one must adapt to the changes if there are plans to remain with the agency. In all actuality, when you look at it, the changes are beneficial for many *reasons.*

Q5: Employee Ethical Guidelines & Practices recent policy changes and updates were discussed during the recent SRC meeting. We welcome any feedback you may have regarding these updates. When submitting your comments, please be sure to reference the specific section(s) your feedback addresses. (Sec. 20.2.1)

- 1) I am in hopes that the Financial Needs Test can be lifted as soon as possible. I agree with the exemptions.
- 2) N/A
- 3) VR/VRB should train the staff how to read the information in a tax return or have someone in the State office to assist in reading more complex returns. Non-accountant staff should not be expected to read returns which also include tax information from a business.
- 4) I agree with the reinstatement of the FNA and should be used the same across the board including the gathering of all necessary income documentation needed for this process. There should be equal fairness and no favoritisms.

Q6: Postsecondary Education and Training Services recent policy changes and updates were discussed during the recent SRC meeting. We welcome any feedback you may have regarding these updates. When submitting your comments, please be sure to reference the specific section(s) your feedback addresses.

- 1) Did I read that FAFSA full time hours = 15 now? Page 8 policy would need updating. Page 14 Role of the

Counselor - Most students are not yet accustomed to request accommodations out of high school- and lack the self-advocacy skills needed. I believe that the Counselor should take a more active role above "encourage the individual to contact the Disability Services Coordinator." (for example, make a written referral, coach the student on self-advocacy skills, among others).

2) N/A

3) Respondent skipped this question

4) I think there need to be additional and on-going Post Secondary Ed training due to the changes as many counselors handling those cases are still confused about determination of eligibility, more so. Eligibility (Sec. 5.1, 5.2, 5.5. 5.6)

Q7: Pre-Employment Transition Services' (Pre-ETS) recent policy changes and updates were discussed during the recent SRC meeting. We welcome any feedback you may have regarding these updates. When submitting your comments, please be sure to reference the specific section(s) your feedback addresses.

1) Any policy changes necessitate staff training.

2) N/A

3) Respondent skipped this question

4) No feedback at this time.

Q8: Project SEARCH recent policy changes and updates were discussed during the recent SRC meeting. We welcome any feedback you may have regarding these updates. When submitting your comments, please be sure to reference the specific section(s) your feedback addresses. (Sec. 12)

1) While Project SEARCH is an excellent training program, it's disappointing that the host business is not hiring more of the job seekers. The model could be employed within Ability Works systems as well.

2) N/A

3) I'm sure this kind of policy is necessary for the smooth running of Project SEARCH, but everyone involved will need special training on the terms, procedures and forms used by VR to ensure that clients are properly served and evaluated.

4) No feedback at this time.

Q9: Postsecondary Education (PSED) recent policy changes and updates were discussed during the recent SRC meeting. We welcome any feedback you may have regarding these updates. When submitting your comments, please be sure to reference the specific section(s) your feedback addresses. (Sec. 13)

1) No other comments.

2) N/A

3) Respondent skipped this question

4) I think there needs to be additional and on-going Post Secondary Ed training due to the changes as many counselors handling those cases are still confused about determination of eligibility, more so. Eligibility (Sec. 5.1, 5.2, 5.5. 5.6)

Q10: Transition Services' recent policy changes and updates were discussed during the recent SRC meeting. We welcome any feedback you may have regarding these updates. When submitting your comments, please be sure to reference the specific section(s) your feedback addresses. (Sec. 10)

1) No other comments.

2) N/A

3) Respondent skipped this question

4) No feedback at this time.

July 30th, 2025, Hearing Officer Resume Review

The SRC held a special meeting to review and evaluate candidates for impartial hearing officer positions for VR and VRB. Emphasizing the Council's responsibility to ensure all hearing officers meet MDRS policy standards, the group reviewed 13 applications, considering qualifications, VR knowledge, mediation experience, and potential conflicts of interest. Five candidates were deemed qualified, though some required additional training or raised considerations about location or prior experience. Several applicants were found unqualified due to factors such as public employment, insufficient VR knowledge, or excessive per diem requests. The Council discussed ethical guidelines, virtual hearings, and travel considerations, with legal counsel clarifying federal and state requirements. MDRS will proceed with contracting the qualified candidates, develop targeted training, address travel and conflict-of-interest guidelines, and submit approved candidates to the Attorney General's Office. The RFQ will remain open

for additional recruitment, and members were reminded of upcoming events and a photo opportunity for the SRC website.

October 2nd, 2025, Quarterly Meeting

SRC Chairman: Mr. Don Brown called the 3rd quarterly SRC meeting to order, welcomed attendees, and noted that meeting materials were provided both in person and virtually. With no quorum present, all voting actions were tabled. Mr. Brown briefly shared a personal health update and thanked members for their support. The meeting was recorded, and no public comments were received. Approval of the minutes was tabled due to the lack of quorum.

MDRS Executive Director Comments: Billy Taylor provided an agency-wide update highlighting MDRS's progress in stabilizing the FY2025 budget through targeted policy changes, improved fiscal oversight, and several positive developments, including a COLA and \$4 million in reallocation funds. These efforts allowed the agency to avoid projected overspending and establish stronger long-term financial practices. He outlined key policy adjustments such as reinstating the Financial Needs Analysis, modifying post-secondary education support, shifting housing assistance toward on-campus options, and strengthening billing alignment with colleges and universities. Taylor noted that these changes required extensive administrative work and generated considerable public feedback, which staff addressed through continuous communication.

Mr. Taylor also discussed the recent RSA monitoring visit—the first in more than 15 years—which was constructive but raised concerns about applying new policies to existing clients. MDRS explained the necessity of these actions and noted that new “guardrails” will help prevent future issues. He highlighted statewide staff training to ensure consistent eligibility determinations and described ongoing efforts to evaluate and modernize the AbilityWorks program. With declining participation and outdated facilities, AbilityWorks is undergoing a comprehensive review by consultant Greg Snead, with a goal of transitioning to more modern, workforce-aligned services and achieving a long-term net-zero financial model. The final consultant report is expected in November.

Taylor briefly addressed potential impacts of a federal shutdown, noting that MDRS can continue operating temporarily using state funds but is monitoring guidance closely. He closed by thanking staff and the SRC for their support during a challenging year, emphasizing that MDRS is now on solid fiscal ground with policies designed to promote sustainability, accountability, and improved service delivery.

Don Brown expressed appreciation for MDRS leadership, acknowledging the difficulty of the decisions made and commending the agency for acting quickly to stabilize operations. He praised staff for their steady judgment and commitment, noting that MDRS prevented a difficult financial situation from “losing a wheel” and is now moving forward on a stronger foundation.

Client Assistance Program (CAP) Report: Pshon Barrett reported a significant rise in calls to the CAP office in August, mainly from students and parents seeking clarification on the new Financial Needs Analysis and college housing policies. Many were confused about ineligibility notices and the requirement to live on campus, especially since some universities lack adequate housing—a concern also raised during the August 1 public hearing.

Dr. Jennifer Jackson clarified that MDRS may approve off-campus housing when students document that on-campus options are unavailable or inaccessible, including disability-related needs, and noted that staff training is underway to ensure consistent application of these policies.

Ms. Barrett emphasized that the recent policy changes feel substantial to many families and highlighted the need for stronger communication and continued counselor training. She hopes that once housing and financial aid issues stabilize, CAP can shift attention to other client needs. Don Brown acknowledged the volume of inquiries and noted that these adjustments are part of MDRS's efforts to maintain fiscal responsibility.

Due Process Hearing decisions last quarter: One due process hearing was held on September 23, 2025, involving a student who declined to provide required financial documentation for the Financial Needs Analysis. Because the student's FAFSA listed parental income, MDRS policy required assuming 100% financial participation when

documentation was not submitted. The student appealed without CAP assistance. Hearing Officer Lydia Morales conducted the hearing, and a written decision is expected within 30 days. Dr. Jackson noted that even with the family's income included, the outcome regarding financial support would not have changed.

OVR Program Report: Dr. Jennifer Jackson provided the OVR program report, highlighting current performance metrics, Order of Selection updates, and management reports for July through September. While goals were initially based on entering an Order of Selection, they may change since that is no longer being pursued. District IPE achievements ranged from 8% to 22%, with an overall combined goal of 12% and 503 IPEs already achieved. Open cases include 1,725 potentially eligible individuals and 1,992 transition students. Successfully rehabilitated clients total 965, surpassing the combined district goal of 40%, indicating goals may need to be increased.

She also discussed training and professional development efforts, including statewide eligibility training with NTACTION and upcoming scenario-based sessions scheduled for October 29-30, 2025, to ensure consistent eligibility determinations. Policy and procedure updates are ongoing, with a combined manual in development and weekly policy reminders distributed to staff. Corrective Action Plans have been implemented in four districts following audits, restricting counselor access until retraining is completed. Federal monitoring by RSA was completed smoothly, with the final report expected in several months.

Regarding the August 1, 2025, public hearing, Don Brown inquired about outcomes. Dr. Jackson confirmed that all questions and comments were addressed, included in the minutes, and are posted on the MDRS website, with email copies available for attendees.

OVRB Program Report: Dorothy Young provided an update on OVRB programs, staffing, and client services. She highlighted new hires at the EMERGE Center, including a Center Director and a Braille/technology instructor who will also lead Pre-ETS. At the Addie McBride Center, staff will receive formal training to improve Pre-ETS documentation and tracking. Recent case reviews identified issues with delayed communication and incomplete files, prompting additional training and reassignment of cases to senior counselors to ensure timely service. Despite staffing challenges, the division has exceeded its employment goals, serving over 110 clients with the most significant disabilities and 769 with significant disabilities. Employment outcomes have improved, with average client wages rising from \$11.43 in 2013 to \$19.23 in 2025, and measurable skill gains increasing from zero to 62.

Ms. Young also addressed program funding and service priorities. She explained that some clients receive medical treatments, such as corneal transplants, to maintain employment, and counselors track employment status carefully to distinguish between new placements and ongoing employment. Pshon Barrett and Mary Meruvia emphasized ensuring clients with the most severe impairments receive equitable support and encouraged creative use of comparable benefits and advocacy for increased state funding to expand services.

Updates on the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) included successful military base contracts for blind vendors and recognition of Mississippi's strong performance nationally. Ms. Young raised concerns about a Department of Defense proposal to eliminate the Randolph-Sheppard Program on military bases, noting RSA support and increased visibility requirements for vendors. She concluded by reaffirming the agency's focus on transparency, accountability, compliance, and leveraging state funding to enhance services.

Consumer Satisfaction Review:

- **Consumer Satisfaction Survey:** Dr. Jennifer Jackson presented 3rd-quarter consumer satisfaction results for both blind and non-blind participants. A total of 253 consumers completed interviews, representing about 20% of each OVR district. Satisfaction ratings remained consistently high, averaging around 4.5 out of 5 across most categories. Non-blind consumers reported strong experiences when applying for services (4.66), planning services (4.69), and receiving services (4.67). Ratings for support from outside service providers averaged 4.0, overall satisfaction was 4.67, and employment-related feedback averaged 4.4. Employment outcomes showed that 79.4% of non-blind consumers and 100% of blind consumers achieved successful closure.

Positive feedback highlighted strong staff support across multiple districts, especially for assistive technology, college assistance, job readiness, and communication. Blind consumers expressed extremely high satisfaction, with service ratings averaging 4.94. Negative comments focused on delays, staff turnover, inconsistent follow-up, and the need for improved job placement services among non-blind consumers.

Don Brown reminded members that ratings were based on a 5-point scale. Pshon Barrett asked for disability-specific detail within districts, noting the differing levels of support required; Dorothy Young confirmed this would be addressed later in the meeting.

- **Program Evaluation Survey:** Kellie Rushing presented the Consumer Satisfaction Survey for OVR Districts 9 and 10. District 9 reached 196 of 519 active consumers by phone and received 16 responses from 197 emailed surveys. District 10 reached 143 of 507 consumers and received 5 responses from 79 emailed surveys. Satisfaction ratings, based on a 4-point scale, showed overall service scores of 3.10 in D9 and 3.06 in D10, with employment-related scores of 3.12 in D9 and 4.00 in D10.

In District 9, consumers were generally satisfied but reported concerns about staff turnover and reduced counselor availability; Rushing recommended a formal plan to maintain service continuity. In District 10, consumers expressed confusion about recent policy changes, prompting recommendations for clearer communication.

She also shared updates to the survey format, including a more user-friendly emoji rating system intended to boost response rates. Survey results are now being shared with the training department to address district-specific needs, and any consumer requests for follow-up are routed to the appropriate manager for resolution.

Nominations Committee: Pat Fontaine stated there were no additional updates from the Nominations Committee but would await the updated vacancy list to proceed with recommendations.

Consumer Satisfaction Survey Committee: Mr. Brown asked about the Consumer Satisfaction Survey Committee, noting it isn't mentioned in the bylaws. Mary Meruvia explained it was an ad hoc group to ensure survey inclusivity and is not a standing committee. Mr. Brown thanked members for their work and recommended keeping the committee inactive, removing it from the regular agenda, and revisiting it only if needed.

Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) Report: Mr. Duke reported that the Statewide Independent Living Council met on September 4th but was unable to achieve a quorum due to a member being called away for a hospice-related emergency. He also noted ongoing challenges with scheduling required training, which had been delayed due to a federal shutdown affecting the ACLU(American Civil Liberties Union). Training will be rescheduled once guidance from Washington is provided, with the hope that it occurs soon. The council's next meeting is scheduled for December 4th.

Budget Committee: Rebecca Treadway presented the SRC budget report, noting that no current-year funds had been spent and requesting clarification on the "first" and "second" federal allotments. Andy Salin explained that MDRS receives its federal funding in two installments each year, both of which must be fully spent within the same fiscal year or redirected to Section 110 activities. He emphasized the importance of verifying budget figures with him prior to meetings, and Ms. Treadway agreed to coordinate with him a month ahead of each SRC meeting.

Treadway reported significant underutilization across all budget categories, with \$24,981 remaining from the \$52,114 total budget. Unused funds in travel, contractual services, commodities, and satisfaction surveys will be redirected as required. When asked about the unused funds, Mr. Salin confirmed they cannot carry over into the next fiscal year.

Members discussed opportunities to better use available funding, including sending council members to the national SRC conference. Pshon Barrett and Don Brown agreed that the council should prioritize conference participation and other initiatives to make full use of the budget. Brown encouraged member input and collaboration moving forward. The budget report was accepted.

Bylaws Committee: Pablo Diaz presented recommended bylaw revisions focused on modernizing meeting procedures, clarifying the use of video and teleconference participation, defining how special meetings may be held, and ensuring quorum, minutes, and voting processes comply with public meeting laws. These proposals were shared with members in advance and address the most immediate updates needed.

Pshon Barrett and Don Brown noted additional areas requiring future revision, including clarifying the vice chair's role, election procedures, and references to standing or executive committees. They agreed the bylaws remain a work in progress.

Mary Meruvia recommended further legal review to ensure consistency with the Rehabilitation Act, pointing out terminology concerns—such as the use of “oversight”—and the absence of references to OVRB. She emphasized the importance of aligning the bylaws with statutory language. Don Brown and Dorothy Young agreed, noting that the SRC collaborates with OVR rather than exercises oversight.

Because a quorum was not present, Diaz stated that the bylaw updates will be brought back for a vote at the next meeting.

SRC Orientation Committee: Ed Butler was not in attendance. Pat Fontaine stated that there was nothing new to report.

***Additional State Rehabilitation Council Member Activities During 2025
(October 2nd, 2025, Quarterly Meeting)***

Inactive Members and Nomination Discussion: Chairman Don Brown and Leigh Cone reviewed member attendance and compliance, noting several critical vacancies, especially in business, industry, and labor. Josh Bowers may return in 2026. A membership matrix will be shared to clarify roles. Mary Meruvia stressed that vacancies should not be declared before replacements to avoid delays in state plan approval and funding.

The Council plans annual nomination announcements, coordinated with the SRC Annual Report, website, and direct outreach. Potential nominees include Christy Flowers, Ronnie Brown, and Dwight Owens. Pat Fontaine will manage nominations, ensuring compliance and a majority of members with disabilities.

SRC Website Update: Leigh Cone updated the Council on the new MS SRC website, which is now live and will be linked on the MDRS homepage pending approval. The site, also registered with NCSRC, features the SRC's vision, agendas, minutes, and other resources to improve accessibility and visibility for consumers. Members were encouraged to review the site and provide feedback: <https://www.MDRS.ms.gov/SRC>

❖ **Formal SRC Input: Responses to SRC Questionnaires – October 2025 Meeting**

Q1: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, what further input do you have for VR/VRB regarding the extent, scope, effectiveness of services provided; and functions performed by the Designated State Unit (DSU) that affect or potentially affect the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving employment outcomes?

- 1) N/A
- 2) None at this time.
- 3) MDRS continues to provide valuable services that help individuals with disabilities prepare for and achieve employment. However, there remains a significant service gap for young adults who complete high school or college and are no longer eligible for Pre-ETS under WIOA. Many of these individuals still need structured supports to bridge the transition into employment or postsecondary training. Another need is the development of peer mentor programs for college students with disabilities to help them navigate accommodations, campus life, and self-advocacy. Expanding support in these areas would strengthen continuity and improve long-term employment outcomes.
- 4) None
- 5) According to reports presented at the third quarter SRC meeting, the services provided by OVR/OVRB and the functions performed by the Designated State Unit seem to be effective. With helping

individuals with disabilities in achieving employment outcomes.

- 6) I feel that the staff is doing a good job considering the turnover that it has. The supervisors have a plan to handle cases in a timelier manner.
- 7) Back to OVR Basics training for all OVR Staff to include a full listing of comparable benefits for consideration prior to authorizing OVR funds. Customer service training for all new staff, and ongoing for all staff. Continue to try to raise salaries to attract and keep quality new professionals.
- 8) Training is needed for everyone.
- 9) I am happy that the agency's true purpose is coming into fruition as it pertains to individuals with true disabilities.

Q2: Having heard this quarter's report on the results of consumer satisfaction surveys, do you have any comments or recommendations for input into the service delivery process?

- 1) N/A
- 2) Encouraging collaboration between OVR counselors, community colleges, and universities could help bridge the service gap for students with disabilities who complete their education but still need assistance entering the workforce. Strengthening these partnerships would create a smoother continuum of support from high school through adulthood.
- 3) It is encouraging to see that consumer satisfaction remains high. This reflects the dedication of MDRS staff and partners across the state. Continued collaboration and communication between counselors, schools, providers, consumers, and families will be key to maintaining this success—especially during the critical transition from Pre-ETS to adult OVR services. As satisfaction levels remain strong, it may be beneficial to collect more feedback from individuals who are transitioning out of eligibility or aging out of Pre-ETS. Their insights could guide improvements in bridging services and ensuring that postsecondary and employment supports are better aligned.
- 4) None
- 5) Keep reaching out to get as many responses as possible.
- 6) Keep up the great work. Those are very good scores.
- 7) I think that the Program Integrity Unit should begin studying the satisfaction questionnaires that are done after case closure as well as the ones being done during service delivery to see trends that could be addressed.
- 8) Given the number of people/families that we hear complaints from the survey results are questionable.
- 9) No

Q3: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, what further input do you have for the State Plan goals and priorities? What further comment(s) do you have in regard to evaluating the effectiveness of the VR/VRB Program in meeting the goals and priorities?

- 1) No response
- 2) N/A
- 3) The agency is facing the challenges caused by the current Federal Government shutdown as well as possible.
- 4) The State Plan goals are well-aligned. Going forward, adding objectives that specifically address the “gap age” group—those who finish school but remain unemployed or underemployed—would enhance the plan's reach. Tracking outcomes for this population would provide a clearer picture of long-term program effectiveness.
- 5) None
- 6) OVR/OVRB seem to be effective with meeting their goals and priorities.
- 7) I think the staff is doing a good job. Keep working toward our goals.
- 8) Excited to see the consultants' proposal for the overhaul of the Ability Works. The model for Personal and Vocational Adjustment Training is still a good one.
- 9) No

Q4: What further input do you have for the establishment of the Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP) for the blind?

- 1) No response
- 2) N/A
- 3) Do not neglect the traditional training setting at the Addie McBryde Center.

- 4) Establishing a CRP for the blind is a wonderful step toward expanding equitable access to training and employment opportunities. Involving consumers and community partners early in the planning process will ensure the program meets real-world needs and promotes inclusion.
- 5) None
- 6) Having a choice of services and service providers is helpful to the consumers with achieving employment outcomes.
- 7) The staff is making great strides in this area.
- 8) More outreach to attract more customers to utilize it.
- 9) No

Q5: After reviewing the SRC website, do you have any suggestions or changes you like to see made or added?

- 1) N/A
- 2) Just agree with everyone to have it on the front page of the MDRS website for easy accessibility.
- 3) None at this time.
- 4) The website is informative and easy to navigate. Adding brief success stories, highlights, and updates on State Plan progress could increase engagement and help the public better understand the SRC's work and impact.
- 5) None
- 6) Not at this time.
- 7) The website is outstanding. Thank you for your hard work, Ms. Cone.
- 8) It's important to update it at least quarterly to keep it relevant.
- 9) None at this time

Continued, 2024 Mississippi - State Rehabilitation Council Activities

Additional State Rehabilitation Council Member Activities in Partnership with the Offices of Vocational Rehabilitation and Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind

OVR and OVRB are advocates of the State Rehabilitation Council's mission and assist the SRC with its responsibilities. The offices of OVR and OVRB provide liaison support as well as administrative, technical assistance, and coordination in support of the SRC's responsibilities.

Support is provided by MDRS-OVR/OVRB to coordinate activities, provide administrative support, and when necessary, to facilitate the work of the SRC and, as requested, to assist the SRC members with specific mandated duties.

Administrative, Technical, and Liaison Support offer the following services:

- ❖ **In-Person Meetings** – coordinate dates, times, location, distribute communications, and handouts to SRC Council members and attendees.
- ❖ **Virtual Meetings** – provide virtual meeting communications and reference handouts to SRC Council Members and attendees
- ❖ **Meals/Refreshments** – coordination of meal selection, deliveries, and location
- ❖ **Communications/Bulletins** – communications are distributed to members regarding quarterly meetings, special meetings, agendas, and follow up agenda items.
- ❖ **Minutes** – meetings recordings, preparation of the official legal record of the council meetings, and coordinate amendments to previous minutes.
- ❖ **Technical Support** – technical assistance is provided during meeting for presentations, etc. and coordination of technical equipment availability
- ❖ **Website** – preparation and coordination through MDRS personnel for SRC communication uploads to the MDRS website
- ❖ **SRC Annual Report** – prepare the SRC Annual Report; coordinate SRC Annual Report upload to the MDRS website; submissions to the SRC, to the RSA contact(s), to the Governor and members of the Mississippi Legislature.

Office of Vocation Rehabilitation (OVR)

Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind (OVRB)

Consumer Satisfaction Survey – 2025

Results for Closed Ended Questions

The ratings for the various services consumers received are presented below using the average (mean) score given to each item by all respondents interviewed. If an item did not apply to a particular respondent or if the consumer did not know or refused to rate an item, the consumer's response is not included in calculating the average score for that item. The seven items rated are in Table 1 (for verbiage, reference questionnaire.) Chart 1 is included for an easy visual comparison. The respondents were asked to rate the items (Questions Q1 to Q4 and questions Q7 to Q9) on a scale of 1 to 5, with '1' being *very bad* and '5' being *very good*. Thus, a high score indicates that the service was *good* and a low score indicates that it was *bad*.

Table 1 - Service Ratings by Consumer

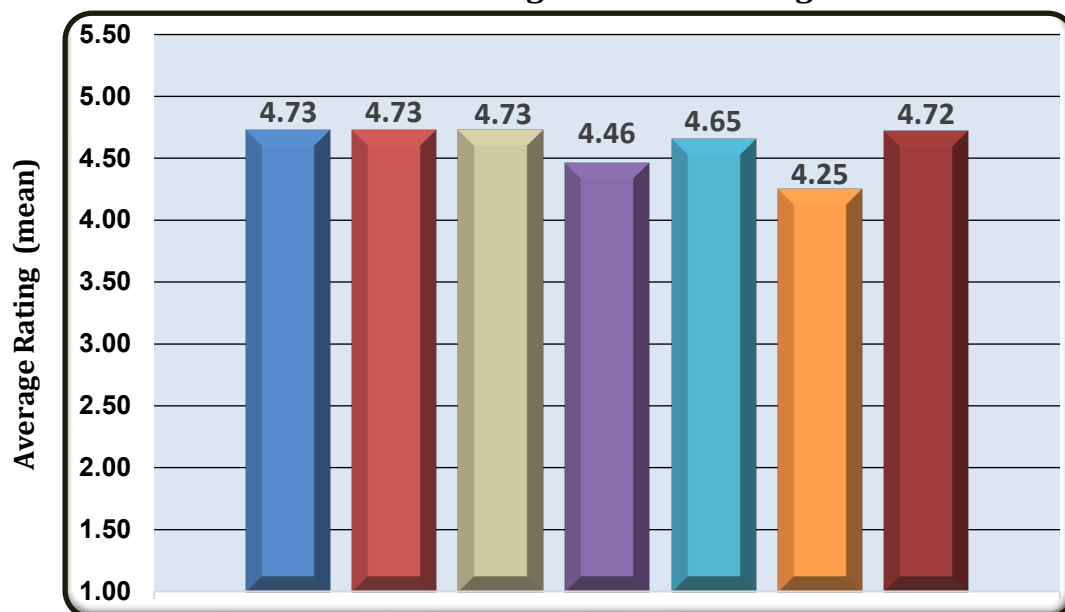
Rate the following items on a scale of '1 to 5', with '1' being *very bad* and '5' being *very good*.

	# of Consumers	Average Rating (mean)
Q1 The help the VR staff provided at the time you applied for VR services.	1009	4.73
Q2 The help from the VR staff during the planning of your services.	1011	4.73
Q3 The help from the VR staff when you were receiving your VR Services.	1007	4.73
Q4 The help you received from other agencies or service providers.	120	4.46
Q7 Your employment outcome.	840	4.65
Q8 Employment benefits provided by your new employer.	563	4.25
Q9 Overall, how do you rate the services you received?	1013	4.72

...

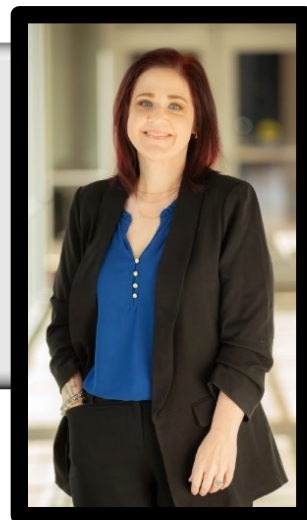
Note: The items in Table 1 and Chart 1 are labeled Q1 to Q4 and Q7 to Q9, these are the names of the questions in the above questionnaire.

Chart 1 - Average Consumer Ratings



Data obtained from Wolfgang Frese Survey Research Laboratory/SSRC/MSU report dated October 2025.

Vocational Rehabilitation Director
Dr. Jennifer Jackson



Dear Fellow Mississippians:

In 2025, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation provided services to 14,373 individuals with disabilities. Our continued investment in supporting students with disabilities has strengthened our partnerships with schools, private providers, and community rehabilitation programs across Mississippi. These collaborations have deepened the educational community's understanding of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), which play a critical role in helping potentially eligible and eligible students explore career options, build decision-making skills, and understand a wide range of employment opportunities. Through Pre-ETS, students gain the confidence and foundation needed to make informed decisions about post-secondary education, training, and future employment.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) has further positioned Mississippi Vocational Rehabilitation to broaden and refine its service delivery. While we remain firmly committed to meeting the needs of students with disabilities, we have also expanded our focus on adults with disabilities. Through individualized counseling, skill development, and tailored guidance, we ensure that all eligible consumers receive the support they need to understand their employment strengths, address barriers, and achieve their highest vocational potential.

We also continue to strengthen our policy and procedure framework to support effective and efficient service delivery across all programs. This ongoing work ensures that staff have the clarity and structure needed to provide consistent, high-quality services aligned with federal requirements and best practices.

We are proud to recognize the Mississippi State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) as an essential partner in advancing our mission. The SRC's collaboration and insight continue to enhance the quality and direction of our programs. We also extend our appreciation to the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS) Executive Director, Billy Taylor, for his steadfast support and leadership.

As we move forward, we remain committed to delivering high-quality vocational rehabilitation services that empower individuals with disabilities to achieve competitive integrated employment. We value the continued partnership and support of all stakeholders who share in this work and help advance our shared vision for a stronger, more inclusive Mississippi workforce.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jennifer Jackson".

Jennifer Jackson, Ed. D.
Director, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Mississippi
Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services

OVR: Performance Indicators

In PY 2025, **13,531** Mississippians with disabilities received services including, but not limited to counseling and guidance in adjustment to disability, vocational exploration, physical and mental restoration, job training, assistive technology, and job placement.

VR also assisted **2,795** (PY 2025) potentially eligible students with disabilities. Individuals served by VR have a wide array of disabilities including, but not limited to hearing loss or deafness, amputations, mental and emotional disorders, epilepsy, developmental disorders, traumatic brain injuries, orthopedic impairments, speech impairments, etc. The total number of VR consumers that obtained competitive integrated employment in PY 2025 was **3,177**.

OVR services are provided through the federal grant (78.7 percent) through Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), our federal partner, which is state matched with appropriation (21.3 percent) from the Mississippi Legislature. Without these funds, Mississippians with disabilities in need of services would not have had access to VR services. Under Section 116(b)(2)(A) of WIOA, there are six Primary Indicators of Performance.

OVR will continue to submit quarterly 911 data in order to establish baseline information for our common performance measures. OVR received data on the WIOA new performance indicators from the quarterly data dashboard report from the RSA Dashboard. The RSA Dashboard, 1st quarter through 4th quarter data for period PY 2024 (*July 1, 2024, through June 30, 2025*) indicated the following:

- **Employment Rate - 2nd Quarter After Exit: 64.70%** - The percentage of participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program (for Title I Youth, the indicator is the percentage of participants in education or training activities, or in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit);
- **Employment Rate – 4th Quarter After Exit: 60.70%** - The percentage of participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the fourth quarter after exit from the program (for Title I Youth, the indicator is the percentage of participants in education or training activities, or in unsubsidized employment during the fourth quarter after exit);
- **Credential Attainment: 51.50%** - The percentage of those participants enrolled in an education or training program (excluding those in on-the-job training (OJT) and customized training) who attain a recognized postsecondary credential or a secondary school diploma, or its recognized equivalent, during participation in or within one year after exit from the program;
- **Measurable Skill Gains: 80.10%** - The percentage of program participants who, during a program year, are in an education or training program that leads to a recognized postsecondary credential or employment and who are achieving measurable skill gains, defined as documented academic, technical, occupational, or other forms of progress, towards such a credential or employment.
- **Effectiveness in Serving Employers:** WIOA Sec. 116(b)(2)(A)(i)(VI) requires the Departments to **establish a primary indicator of performance for effectiveness in serving employers**. The departments are piloting three approaches designed to gauge three critical workforce needs of the business community.

Continued, OVR: Performance Indicators

PROGRAM YEAR 2024 - (From 7/01/24 – 6/30/25)		
State: Mississippi - REPORTING AGENCY: MDRS		
EFFECTIVENESS IN SERVING EMPLOYERS		
Employer Services		Establishment Count
Employer Information and Support Services		16364
Workforce Recruitment Assistance		6848
Engaged in Strategic Planning/Economic Development		943
Accessing Untapped Labor Pools		2041
Training Services		235
Incumbent Worker Training Services		70
Rapid Response/Business Downsizing Assistance		2
Planning Layoff Response		9
Pilot Approaches	Numerator	Rate
	Denominator	
Retention with Same Employer in the 2nd and 4th Quarters After Exit Rate	2058	82
	2514	
Employer Penetration Rate	17346	19
	91257	
Repeat Business Customers Rate	13093	75
	17346	

OVR: Program Services & Highlights

- **Deaf Services** assists individuals who are **Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or Deaf Blind or Late Deafened** find employment, attend education and training programs, and learn more about their community resources. The MDRS Deaf Services Program continues to promote excellence by striving to assist new RCD's (Rehabilitation Counselors for the Deaf) to reach the required communications skills level on the Signed Communication Proficiency Interview, an American Sign Language assessment developed by the Rochester Institute of Technology. Adequate communication skills are a pre-requisite to meaningful counseling and guidance with people who are Deaf and use manual communication. This skill, along with other specialized training, has been a vital factor in the successful rehabilitation of individuals with deafness or significant hearing loss. In SFY 2024, Deaf Services were provided to **4,551** Mississippians resulting in **2,079** successful rehabilitations.
- **15 Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) known as AbilityWorks are operated by MDRS.** **AbilityWorks** provides vocational assessment and work adjustment training for individuals with disabilities. This is possible through a wide array of contract and subcontract services provided to local business and industry.
- During SFY 2024, **AbilityWorks** served a total of **1,725** individuals with disabilities (VR/VRB). AbilityWorks establishes cooperative agreements with local businesses to provide community-based work experience, customized training, and on-the-job training.

OVR: Serving Mississippi Students And Youth With Disabilities

Pre-Employment Transition Services:

VR works with potentially eligible students with disabilities ages of 14 through 21 to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services, as well as our eligible secondary school students with disabilities, their families, and school personnel, to ensure there is an integrated program of education and vocational training available to begin to build a foundation for a career pathway, and then to help provide a seamless transition from school to work. In SFY 2025 (July 2024-June 2025), the number of students that received Pre-Employment Transition Services was **2,795**.

Students with disabilities, ages 14-21, receive the Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) listed below (as needed) to help prepare for post-secondary education such as college, vocational schools, etc. Pre-Employment Transition Services are:

- ❖ Counseling on opportunities for post-secondary education such as college, vocational schools, etc.;
- ❖ Work-Based Learning Experiences, including internships and On-the-Job Training;
- ❖ Training in self-advocacy and social skills; and/or
- ❖ Peer Mentoring Programs at JSU, MSU, USM and NEMCC.

Supported Employment:

We assist individuals with the most significant disabilities who require intensive support services to prepare for, secure, retain, or regain employment. Each MDRS district has a Supported Employment Team consisting of a specialized VR/SE counselor, and a Vocational Training Instructor who oversees the work of Job Trainers working on site with our consumers. During SFY 2025, **663** individuals received Supported Employment services, **90** resulting in successful employments.

Project SEARCH:

Project SEARCH Mississippi is administered by the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services and is a joint partnership between MDRS, a business and a school district.



The Project SEARCH Program is a unique, business-led, nine-month employment preparation program that takes place entirely at the workplace. Up to 12 students with disabilities experience total workplace immersion, classroom instruction, career exploration, and hands-on training through three different worksite rotations. The goal for each participant is competitive employment. To reach that goal, the program provides real-life work experience combined with training in employability and independent-livingskills to help young people with significant disabilities make successful transitions to productive adult life.

Project Search Mississippi Success: **434** individuals with disabilities have graduated from Project SEARCH Mississippi since Project SEARCH UMMC launched in August 2018. **323** of those individuals have gained employment. Mississippi currently has **13** Project SEARCH sites across the state in current operation. Over **75** interns will be participating in Project SEARCH beginning in August 2025.

What does a good Project SEARCH Candidate look like?

• Must have a strong desire to work.	• Able to manage their own self-care skills.
• Meet all their high school credit requirements for graduation, certification, or completion.	• Good attendance record.
• Must be 18-21(Transition site), 18-30 (Adult site) years old.	• Able to pass drug test and background check.
• Must be eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation.	• Ability to understand safety.
• Basic and effective communication skills.	• Ability to take directions.
• Basic reading and writing skills.	• Maintain appropriate behavior in the workplace.

Project SEARCH - Current Sites/Participating Schools

University Medical Center–Jackson Rankin County School District Pearl School District Siemens - Richland Rankin County School District Pearl School District Forrest General–Hattiesburg Hattiesburg County School District Petal County School District Lamar County School District South Central Regional Medical Center–Laurel Jones County School District Laurel School District King Daughters Hospital–Brookhaven Lincoln County School District Brookhaven School District Singing River Health–Ocean Springs Ocean Springs School District Jackson County School District Merit Health-Natchez Natchez-Adams School District Singing River Health-Pascagoula Pascagoula-Gautier School District Baptist Medical Center-Kosciusko Kosciusko / Attala School District Keesler Air Force Base Biloxi Public School District Ochsner Rush Health Lauderdale County School District Meridian School District Singing River Health-Gulfport Long Beach School District Gulfport School District Neshoba General Hospital–Philadelphia Neshoba County School District Philadelphia School District St. Dominic Hospital - Jackson Adult Site	Viking Range–Greenwood Leflore Christian School Merit Health River Region-Vicksburg Vicksburg–Warren School District Baptist Memorial Hospital–Oxford Lafayette School District Oxford School District Columbus Air Force Base Lowndes County School District Baptist Memorial Hospital–Olive Branch DeSoto County School District Baptist Hospital–Jackson Clinton Public School District Jackson Public School District Madison County School District North Mississippi Medical Center–Tupelo Tupelo School District Lee County School District Nettleton School District Itawamba County Schools Pontotoc County Schools North Mississippi Health Services-Eupora Adult site Milwaukee Tools-Jackson Adult site OCH-Regional Medical Center-Starkville Starkville Public School District Southwest Regional Medical Center - McComb North Pike School District South Pike School District McComb High School Division of Medicaid - Jackson Jackson Public School Jay Allen Toyota - Gulfport Adult Site Baptist Memorial - Calhoun Calhoun County School District
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Business Relations Services

Our Business Relations Services partnered with several colleges across Mississippi to host Employer Spotlight Luncheons for students registered with their respective ADA offices. These events were held at Jackson State University, the University of Mississippi, Jones College, and Meridian Community College. Additional luncheons are already planned for both spring and fall of 2026, allowing more students to connect with employers and learn about workplace opportunities tailored to individuals with disabilities.

Community Outreach and Disability Etiquette Training

In 2025, the Business Relations Services (BRS) team expanded its outreach by conducting Disability Awareness Trainings for several key workforce partners across the state. Four trainings were delivered to staff from the Central Mississippi Planning and Development District (CMPDD), South Delta Planning and Development District (SDPDD), TANF WIN Center (MDES), and regional career coaches. These sessions increased disability awareness and strengthened collaboration among agencies serving Mississippi's workforce.

Additionally, the team provided Disability Awareness Training at the University of Mississippi for both staff and students, reinforcing MDRS's commitment to promoting inclusivity within higher education and the broader community.

Marketing Initiatives

Marketing efforts highlighted the success of MDRS clients and partnerships. The success story videos featuring Toyota clients earned two statewide communication awards (award names to be confirmed with the Office of Communications), demonstrating the impact and reach of the agency's marketing strategy.

Updated materials and success stories supported ongoing business relations and helped communicate the value of inclusive hiring to employers and partners.

Industry Tours and Workforce Market Insights

The BRS team strengthened business engagement through new partnerships, successful placements, and collaborative workforce initiatives. New partnerships with Drake Waterfowl in Olive Branch and Aramark at the University of Mississippi resulted in successful hires.

BRS also developed strong relationships with the Delta Arts Alliance and the Mississippi Grammy Museum. Two clients, one MSU ACCESS student and one post-secondary student, completed internships at these organizations and were subsequently hired.

A notable client success story involved a young man who had been living in a boys' home. After being placed in an internship at UMMC–Grenada, he was hired and now lives independently in his own apartment with his own vehicle, illustrating the transformative impact of MDRS services.

Job Fairs and Employment Events

Throughout the year, MDRS partnered with the Mississippi Department of Employment Security (MDES) to host job fairs statewide, as well as one independent event solely organized by MDRS. Locations included Hernando, Hattiesburg, Jackson, and Pearl. These fairs have provided a vital link between job seekers and employers, particularly for those looking to hire individuals with disabilities.

Job Extravaganza Program Expansion

Our Job Extravaganza initiative continues to grow, now reaching more schools throughout Mississippi and featuring 24 job extravaganzas with 8 participating vendors: University of Southern Mississippi – Institute for Disability Studies, Goodwill Industries of Jackson, the ARC of Mississippi, LSI Business Development, Inc., Learning Zone, Inc., Mississippi State University – TK Martin Center, Career Development & Training Institute, and Wesson-Monroe LLC. We continue to maintain close collaboration with these partners as we work together to expand opportunities and support students with disabilities as they transition into the workforce.

OVR: District Map

District I

(Calhoun, Coahoma, Desoto, Lafayette, Marshall, Panola, Tate, Tunica, Quitman, Yalobusha)
51 County Road 166
Oxford, MS 38655
(866) 358-6960

District II

(Alcorn, Benton, Itawamba, Lee, Pontotoc, Prentiss, Tippah, Tishomingo, Union)
2620 Traceland Drive
Tupelo, MS 38801
(877) 367-4598

District III

(Bolivar, Carroll, Grenada, Holmes, Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Washington, Yazoo)
104 Professional Plaza
Greenwood, MS 38930
(833) 607-1900

District IV

(Clay, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Lowndes, Monroe, Montgomery, Oktibbeha, Webster)
317 Industrial Park Road
Starkville, MS 39759
(800) 796-8672

District V

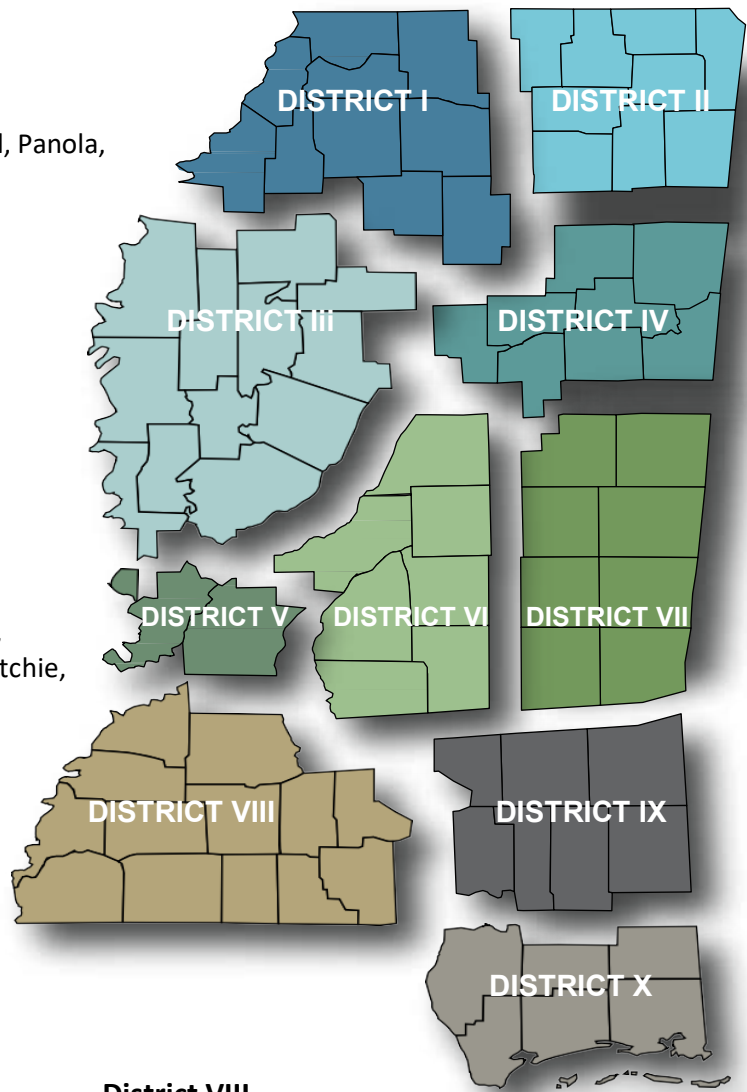
(Hinds, Warren)
3895 Beasley Road
Jackson, MS 39213
(800) 805-3199

District VI

(Attala, Leake, Madison, Rankin, Scott, Simpson, Smith)
1032 Center Pointe Blvd.
Pearl, MS 39208
(833) 355-5602

District VII

(Clarke, Jasper, Kemper, Lauderdale, Neshoba, Newton, Noxubee, Winston)
1003 College Drive
Meridian, MS 39304
(866) 689-7926



District VIII

(Adams, Amite, Claiborne, Copiah, Franklin, Jefferson, Jefferson Davis, Lawrence, Lincoln, Marion, Pike, Walthall, Wilkinson)
1221 Parklane Road
McComb, MS 39649
(800) 378-6259
(866) 689-7926

District IX

(Covington, Forrest, Greene, Jones, Lamar, Perry, Wayne)
#17 J.M. Tatum Industrial Drive
Hattiesburg, MS 39404
(800) 711-4588

District X

(George, Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, Pearl River, Stone)
13486 Fastway Lane
Gulfport, MS 39503
(877) 367-4603

Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind Director **Dorothy Young**



OVRB: Moving the Needle 2.0 – 2025 Highlights

The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind (OVRB), under the leadership of MDRS Executive Director Billy Taylor, proudly shares the impact of our work in 2025. Together, we empowered Mississippians who are blind and visually impaired to achieve independence, earn higher wages, and contribute to our state's economy.

Key Achievements

- **1,557 Mississippians served** with blindness or low vision
- **311 individuals** achieved Competitive Integrated Employment
- **500+ Mississippians** earned new skills or credentials (13 years of data)
- Expanded **Older Blind Services** at Long Beach Training Center, supporting independence for those 55+ (including one participant over 80)

Training & Innovation

- **Traditional Method:** Continued at Addie McBryde Center, University of Mississippi Medical Center campus
- **Structured Discovery Method:** Launched at Long Beach Vocational Training site in July 2024, offering housing and specialized training without leaving the state

Our Commitment

For thirteen years, OVRB has exceeded its goals under the theme *“Moving the Needle.”* Our ninety-plus member team focuses on one Mississippian at a time, increasing wages, credentials, and opportunities. Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors for the Blind remain the cornerstone of our success, listening to dreams and guiding individuals toward independence.

Looking Ahead

OVRB continues to *“Move the Needle 2.0”*—transforming lives, businesses, and communities through careers, training, and skills. We thank our staff, leadership, stakeholders, and the Rehabilitation Services Commission for their partnership.

We look forward to collaborating with you in 2026!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dorothy L. Young".

Dorothy L. Young, M.S., C.V.S.
Director, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind

OVRB: PROGRAM SERVICES AND HIGHLIGHTS

The **Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind** is divided into two regions located in the North and South. Each region is staffed with qualified professionals who provide vocational rehabilitation counseling, education, independent living skills, orientation and mobility training, low vision rehabilitation technology and Deafblind services for eligible Mississippians. Each client works with their OVRB Counselor to develop their Individualized Plan of Services (IPE) to mirror their strengths, abilities, and capabilities for successful employment outcomes.

We specialize in working with individuals who are blind or visually impaired to ensure opportunities for inclusion in the workforce, community, and home. During SFY2025, VRB served a total of 1,557 Mississippians with disabilities and helped 311 consumers achieve a successful employment outcome. VRB provided a range of consumer services, including counseling and guidance in adjustment to disability, vocational exploration, orientation and mobility training, job training, and assistive technology. In addition, through our Pre-ETS partnership with the National Federation of the Blind, we provided Pre-Employment Transition Services to 7 students.

Business Enterprise Program (BEP)

29 Successful BEP Entrepreneurs

The **Business Enterprise Program (BEP)** provides support for self-employment opportunities in the food service industry for Mississippians who are legally blind. These BEP entrepreneurs operate a variety of businesses including vending machine routes, snack bars and cafeterias on military bases. In SFY 2025, **29 individuals** operated **207** successful businesses as BEP vendors.

Without Military Bases	2025
Total Sales	\$1,677,673.34
Sales Tax Paid	\$72,542.00
Wages Paid	\$23,850.80
With Military Bases	2025
Total Sales	\$15,664,211.34
Sales Tax Paid	\$72,542.00*
Wages Paid	\$10,184,931.80

**Military bases do not report their sales tax to us.*

Addie McBryde Memorial Rehabilitation Center for the Blind

Established in 1972

The **Addie McBryde Memorial Rehabilitation Center for the Blind** provided **100+** services to **82** clients from around our great state. The center provides traditional intensive evaluation, training, and personal adjustment services on the campus of the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson, MS. Blind and visually impaired and deaf-blind consumers can participate in orientation and mobility, home management, technology, and braille reading and writing classes to enable them to become independent. Training is offered to Day and Residential consumers who live in the dorm at the center. In SFY 2025, the Addie McBryde Center provided training to 100+ consumers.

Independent Living Services for the Blind (ILB)

Provided services to over 437 consumers

We serve individuals who are legally blind and either over the age of 55 or have a significant secondary disability by providing a variety of independent living services. In SFY 2025, Independent Living Services (ILB) served over **100+** consumers through indirect services such as health fairs, vision screening, peer groups, and outreach. ILB provided direct services to **112 (47 YTD/65 Carryovers)** consumers in **Part B** and **325 (151YTD/174 Carryovers)** in **Older Blind**.

Itinerant Teacher Program

Provided services to 6 consumers

Itinerant teachers work closely with VRB counselors to coordinate services, evaluate client needs, develop living-needs plans and instructional materials, and provide on-site training for consumers who are blind or visually impaired. In 2025, the Itinerant Teacher Program provided services for **6 VRB consumers**.

Mississippi Partners for Informed Choice (M-PIC)

2nd grant initiated 2013

Community Work Incentive Coordinators (CWICs) provide benefits planning and assistance to SSI/SSDI beneficiaries between the ages of 14 to 64 with an employment goal. Services are coordinated through referrals from VR/VRB counselors, school counselors, the Ticket-to-Work helpline, mental health counselors, and other service entities that have direct contact with this underserved population. **512 consumers** were referred for **Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA)** services in FFY 2025.

OVRB Structured Discovery Center Moving the Needle 2.0

Mississippi EMERGE Center

-established March 1,2024

The Mississippi EMERGE Center, located in Long Beach, MS, serves as the state’s second personal adjustment training center. The Center provides comprehensive training under sleep shades, helping clients build confidence, strengthen problem-solving abilities, and gain practical, hands-on experience. Core instruction includes Braille, technology, apartment management, orientation and mobility, and job-readiness skills.

Training is available for both Day and Residential consumers, with residential participants living in apartments rather than dormitories.

In SFY 2025, the Mississippi EMERGE Center trained 10 consumers and successfully launched Structured Discovery Training for participants in the Older Blind Program—marking a significant step forward in the state’s Older Blind Outreach efforts.

Moving the Needle 2.0

Total Consumers Served, Employment Outcomes and Average Hourly Wage Data OVRB Accomplishments

FFY 2025

FFY 2025	Consumers Served	Employment Outcome	Average Hourly Wage	Training (MSG)
10/01/2024 – 09/30/2025	1,557	311	\$19.41	63
10/01/2023 – 09/30/2024	1,692	346	\$19.96	64
10/01/2022 – 09/30/2023	1,736	322	\$17.67	67
10/01/2021 – 09/30/2022	1,898	381	\$18.36	75
10/01/2020 – 09/30/2021	1,872	260	\$16.54	81
10/01/2019 – 09/30/2020	1,764	345	\$14.99	82
10/01/2018 – 09/30/2019	1,743	352	\$15.88	34
10/01/2017 – 09/30/2018	1,523	335	\$14.56	14
10/01/2016 – 09/30/2017	1,403	327	\$13.20	11
10/01/2015 – 09/30/2016	1,610	575	\$12.22	6
10/01/2014 – 09/30/2015	1,823	575	\$11.71	3
10/01/2013 – 09/30/2014	1,944	574	\$11.63	1
10/01/2012 – 09/30/2013	2,062	574	\$11.26	0
Total	9,780	5,312	\$15.18	501

*****The carryover consumers are not included in the overall total of consumers served.**

OVRB: District Counselors Map

District 1 – Oxford

Paula Braxton (662)-234-6182
51 County Road 166
Oxford, MS 38655-9721

District 3 – Greenwood

Meghin Neal (662)-477-1880
104 Professional Plaza
Greenwood, MS 38930

Keena Morris (662)-378-0920
800 Martin Luther King Blvd
Greenville, MS 38701

District 5 – Jackson

Kenneth Hudson - (601) 987-7401
LaCrystal Bryant - (601) 987-7404
Samantha Ashmore - (601) 987-4874
2550 Peachtree St. Ext.
P.O. Box 5314
Jackson, MS 39296

District 6 – Pearl

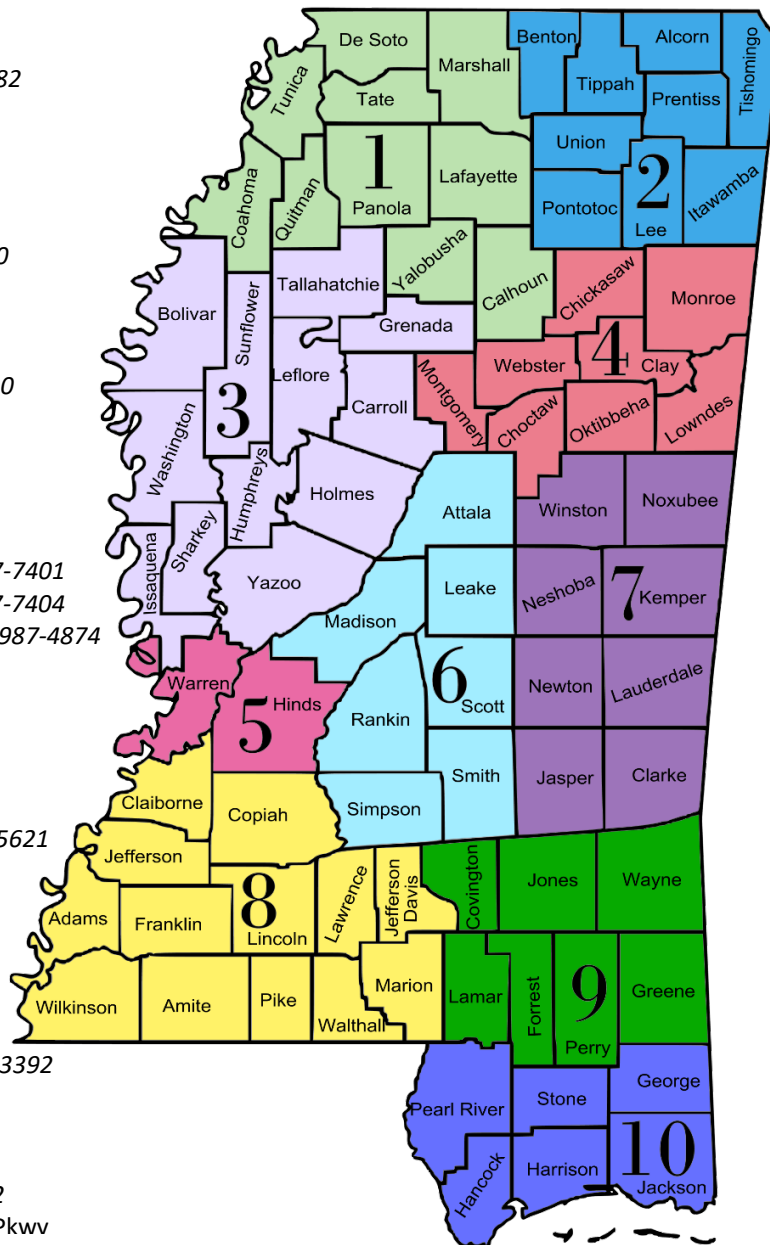
Vanessa Watson (601) 709-5621
1032 Center Point Blvd
Pearl, MS 39208

District 8 – McComb

Meredith McGee (601)-684-3392
1221 Parkland Road
McComb, MS 39648

Pauline Sims (601) 442-7322

105 Col. Johnson Pitchford Pkwy



District 2 – Tupelo

Tina Johnson (662)844-5830
613 Pegram Dr.
Tupelo, MS 38801

District 4 – Starkville

Shundra Johnson (662) 370-1353
921 Alabama Street
Columbus, MS 39702

District 7 – Meridian

Chasnice Evans (601) 483-5391
1003 College Drive
Meridian, MS 39307

District 9 – Hattiesburg

Monika Carney (601) 475-6090
17 JM Tatum Industrial Drive
Hattiesburg, MS 39401

Tabitha Popwell (601)736-5685
710 Broad Street
Columbia, MS 39429

District 10 – Gulfport

Brittany Lacoste (228) 575-3788
13486 Fastway Lane
Gulfport, MS 39503-4609

Laurie Coffey (601) 442-3026
4297 Gautier Vancleave Rd
Gautier, MS 39553

REGIONAL MANAGERS:

District I, II, III, IV, V – Northern

Bryce Upshaw -Regional Manager
(601) 987-7408 bupshaw@mdrs.ms.gov

Amanda Matthes (662) 241-4122
Deputy Regional Manager

District VI, VII, VIII, IX and X – Southern

Laurie Coffey – Regional Manager
(601) 442-3026 lcoffey@mdrs.ms.gov

Myiada Jenkins (601) 709-5618
Deputy Regional Manager

OVR/OVRB

Program Funding And Services (Summaries)

OVR/OVRB: Clients Served Summary

- Clients Served.....15,106
- Clients Potentially Eligible 2,795
- Successfully Employed..... 3,478
- Individualized Plans for Employment Written.....4,642

OVR/OVRB: Program Funding

2025 – Section 110 Amounts

Figures below are based on FFY 2025 (October 1, 2024 – September 30, 2025)

Federal Share:	\$63,469,368	(78.7%)
State Match	<u>\$17,177,859</u>	<u>(21.3%)</u>
Total:	\$80,647,227	(100%)

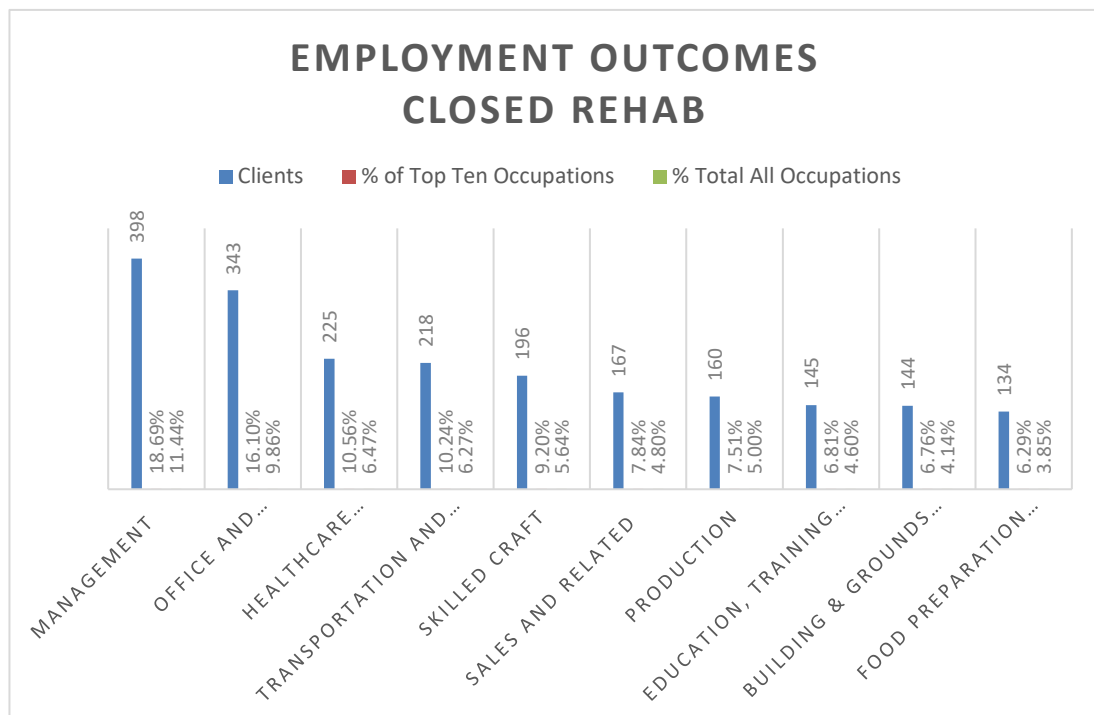
OVR / OVRB

Employment Outcomes – Consumers 2025

Employment In Integrated Settings

Top 10 Occupations of VR and VRB Consumers and the number of Clients that were employed in these occupations:

	# Clients	Closed Rehab	
		% of <u>Top Ten</u> Occupations	% Total All Occupations
Management	398	18.69%	11.44%
Office and Administrative Support	343	16.10%	9.86%
Healthcare Practitioners and Technical	225	10.56%	6.47%
Transportation and Material Moving	218	10.24%	6.27%
Skilled Craft	196	9.20%	5.64%
Sales and Related	167	7.84%	4.80%
Production	160	7.51%	5.00%
Education, Training and Library	145	6.81%	4.60%
Building & Grounds Cleaning, Maintenance	144	6.76%	4.14%
Food Preparation and Serving Related	134	6.29%	3.85%



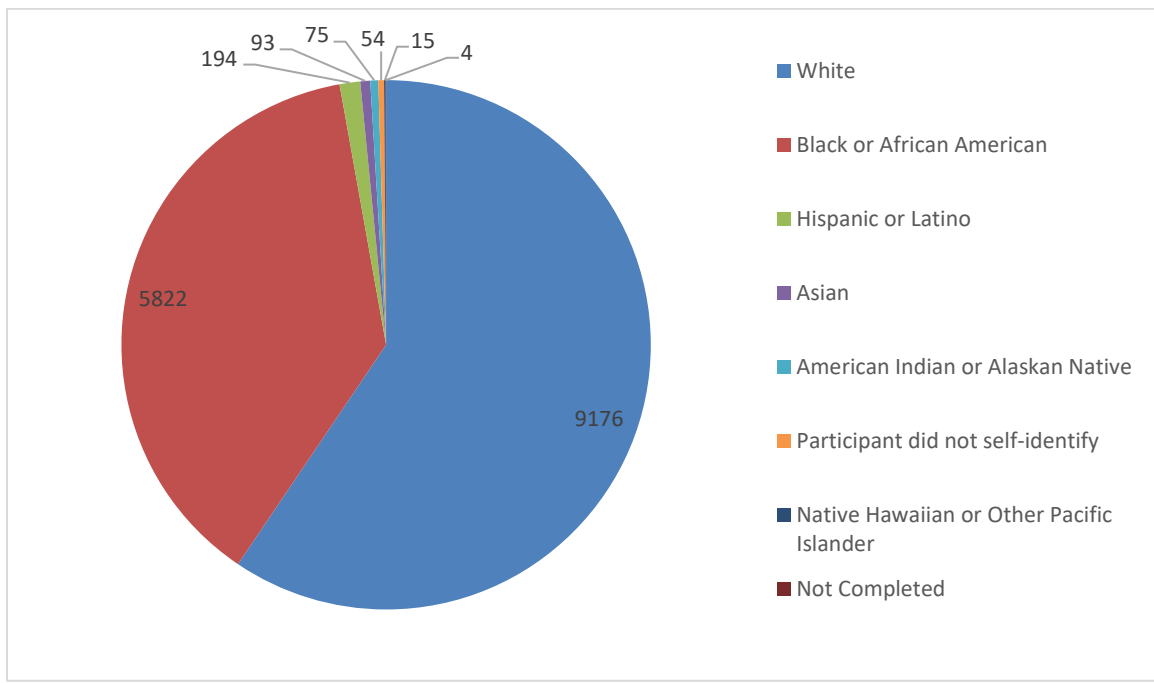
OVR / OVRB

Demographics

Clients Served in 2025

Ethnicity/Race

Ethnicity/Race	Clients	% of Total
White	9176	59.46%
Black or African American	5822	37.72%
Hispanic or Latino	194	1.26%
Asian	93	.60%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	75	.49%
Participant did not self-identify	54	.35%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	15	.10%
Not Completed	4	.03%



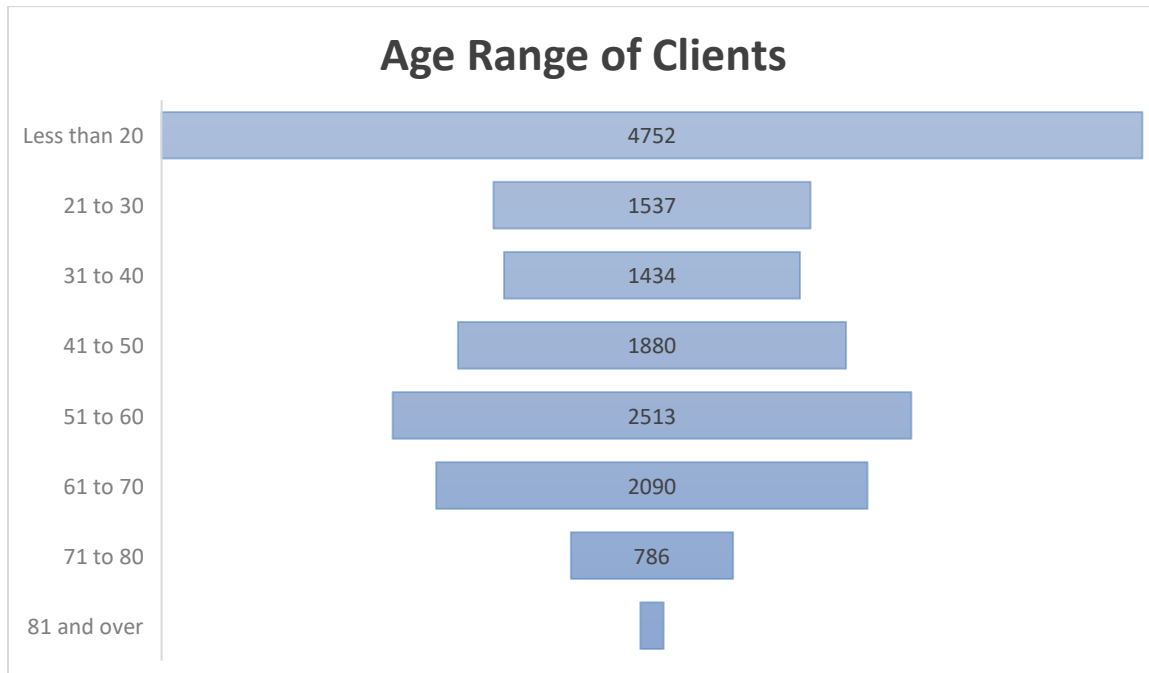
OVR/OVRB Demographics

Clients Served in 2025

Age Range

Age Range	Clients	% to Total
<20	4752	31.46%
21 to 30	1537	10.17%
31 to 40	1434	12.45%
41 to 50	1880	13.33%
51 to 60	2513	16.64%
61 to 70	2090	13.84%
71 to 80	786	5.20%
81 and over	114	.75%

VR/VRB (Combined) – Age Range



OVR Success Stories – *Client Spotlight*



Annie's Warm Smile Lights Up Mississippi State University

At Mississippi State University, the aroma of fresh food and the sounds of laughter fill the dining halls—but there's something else that makes the space feel special: the kindness and joy that Annie Doss, known affectionately as "Ms. Annie," brings to everyone she meets.

For more than 17 years, Annie has worked as a hostess and cashier with Aramark at Mississippi State, a role she's turned into much more than a job—it's her ministry of encouragement. "The favorite part of my job is my students," Annie said with a smile. "The students make me come to work every day because they're

so sweet. I just love my students and my faculty and people too. I try to help the students feel at home when they're away from home."

Annie's journey began with support from the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS) and AbilityWorks, who provided training and helped her connect with meaningful employment. "I didn't know how to start at first," she said. "They helped me get the training I needed, showed me how to work, and gave me confidence that I could do it. I thank them very much for helping me find this job."

Her supervisor, Adrienne Morris, Human Services Manager for Aramark at Mississippi State, has seen firsthand the value of the long-standing partnership with MDRS and AbilityWorks. "We've been working together for many years," Morris said. "Employees like Annie bring such joy and reliability to our team. She's been recognized for her customer service, always greeting students and staff with a great smile and genuine care. She even won a trip to Arizona as part of an employee recognition program for her outstanding service."

Morris explained that Aramark's partnership with MDRS and AbilityWorks has strengthened both their workforce and their workplace culture. "The collaboration has been fabulous," she said. "MDRS helps us connect with talented individuals, and we work together to ensure every employee has what they need to succeed. It's about removing stigma and focusing on what people can do. Employees like Annie remind us daily that ability—not disability—is what truly matters."

For Annie, the job means much more than a paycheck—it's a purpose. "I love my job. I love helping people, praying with them, and just showing love," she said. "Sometimes they come to me for advice or just to talk. They even call me 'Mom' around here."

After nearly two decades of service, Annie says she's as happy as ever. "I feel good about my job, and my coworkers treat me like family," she said. "I've learned how to have peace and confidence. As long as the Lord keeps me going, I'll keep working. I just love it here."

Morris encourages other businesses to follow Aramark's example. "Get started," she said. "Partner with MDRS or AbilityWorks. You'll find loyal, dedicated employees who make your team better. It's not about what someone can't do—it's about discovering what they can do and helping them shine."

At Mississippi State, Annie shines brightly every day. Her laughter, kindness, and unwavering spirit reflect what happens when opportunity meets compassion—proof that with support from MDRS, everyone can find a place to belong, contribute, and thrive.

Finding Purpose and Confidence at Wells Pharmacy

For Braxton White, landing a job at Wells Pharmacy in Laurel wasn't just about earning a paycheck—it was about discovering his confidence, building relationships, and finding a place where he truly belongs.

Through the support of the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS), Braxton began working at Wells Pharmacy as part of a program designed to help individuals with disabilities gain valuable job skills and experience.

"I'd be at home right now and not have a job if it weren't for MDRS," Braxton said. "They helped me get started, and now I feel confident and proud of what I do."



Braxton quickly became an important part of the team, greeting customers, helping with pharmacy tasks, and keeping operations running smoothly. His warm personality and positive attitude stood out right away.

“The favorite part of my job is interacting with all the patients,” Braxton shared. “I’ve learned so many new skills, but mostly I’ve learned how to talk to people and feel more comfortable with myself. My coworkers are the best—they treat me like family.”

Jonathan Wells, part-owner and pharmacy manager of Wells Pharmacy, said the partnership with MDRS has been a wonderful experience from the start.

“We first connected with MDRS through Jamie O’Quinn,” Wells said. “Someone came in, explained the program, and mentioned they had a candidate who wanted to work in a pharmacy. I thought, ‘Let’s give it a chance.’ And we’re really glad we did.”

At first, Braxton began with a few specific tasks to help him learn the ropes. But it didn’t take long for Wells to recognize his potential.

“We started him off in a limited role so he could get familiar with how the pharmacy works,” Wells explained. “But he picked things up quickly. He didn’t have any trouble at all, and before long, we were giving him more responsibility. Eventually, as his time with the program was ending, I asked if he wanted to stay on with us as an employee—and he said he was hoping I’d ask that.”

Wells said the partnership with MDRS has been positive on every level.

“I’m just grateful,” he said. “Every interaction I’ve had with MDRS has been good. They’ve been patient, helpful, and easy to work with. And Braxton has been a blessing to our pharmacy.”

What stands out most to Wells isn’t just Braxton’s work ethic—it’s his kindness.

“Every time he finishes helping a customer, he doesn’t just say, ‘Have a good day.’ He says, ‘Have a *great* day.’ That’s just who he is,” Wells said. “He makes our customers smile.”

For Braxton, this opportunity has changed everything.

“This is the best I’ve ever felt,” he said. “Working here has helped me grow, and now I feel like I can do anything. I want to work here a few more years, then go to college, and maybe come back as a pharmacist one day.”

Wells encourages other business owners to consider partnering with MDRS.

“Just give it a chance,” he said. “Ask questions, talk with MDRS, and see how it goes. You might be surprised. We’ve been very fortunate—and very blessed.”

For Braxton White, a simple opportunity turned into a life-changing experience. With support from MDRS and a workplace that believed in him, he found not just a job—but purpose, confidence, and a brighter future.



Cynthia Finds Confidence and Purpose at DeSoto County Animal Services

For Cynthia Ranzinger, every day at DeSoto County Animal Services in Hernando begins with caring hands and a full heart. From feeding cats to cleaning litter boxes and keeping the shelter running smoothly, she takes pride in knowing her work makes a difference — both for the animals and for the people who visit.

“Working here has been a great experience,” Cynthia said with a smile. “I’ve learned not to get stressed out so much. If you need help, just ask for help and do the job.”

With support from the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS), Cynthia found more than just a job — she found confidence, community, and a sense of independence. Through MDRS’s employment programs, she was matched with a role that fits her skills, interests, and comfort level.

“Cynthia is a hard worker,” said Monica Mock, Director of DeSoto County Animal Services. “She’s dependable, she takes initiative, and she brings a positive attitude to everything she does. Her work ethic encourages others and adds real value to our team.” Cynthia’s favorite part of her day is caring for the shelter’s cats — feeding them, cleaning their spaces, and giving them attention. She’s also started setting goals for herself, including finding a second job one day. “I think I’d like to work with plants,” she said. “Maybe something like a botanist.”

Monica has witnessed firsthand how hiring through MDRS can strengthen a workplace. “Working with MDRS has been such a positive experience,” she said. “They help us match employees to the right roles and provide strategies to make sure everyone succeeds. Our whole staff has become more understanding and open-minded — and our customers notice that warmth when they come in.”

Lee Caldwell, representing the DeSoto County Board of Supervisors, says Cynthia’s story is a reminder of what inclusion truly means. “It’s not about their disability — it’s about their ability,” she said. “Everyone has a gift, and MDRS helps uncover it. When businesses open their doors to these citizens, it benefits the entire community.”

Cynthia’s journey shows what can happen when people are given the opportunity to shine. With encouragement from MDRS and support from her coworkers, she’s discovered new confidence, skills, and purpose.

“I love it here,” Cynthia said. “It feels good to help and to know I’m doing something important.”

At DeSoto County Animal Services, inclusion isn’t just a mission — it’s a way of life. And for Cynthia, it’s opened the door to a brighter, more independent future.

Jennifer Holloway—Finding Confidence and a Fresh Start Through Goodwill and MDRS

When Jennifer Holloway walks into the Jacksonian Plaza Goodwill each morning, she carries with her more than experience—she carries gratitude, determination, and hope for the future.

“I pretty much do whatever needs to be done,” Jennifer said with a smile. “I help organize the store, keep things color-coded and neat, and assist customers. My favorite part of the job is helping people and keeping the store looking its best.”

Jennifer came to Goodwill Industries of Mississippi through the support of the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS), which helps individuals with disabilities and barriers to employment find meaningful work. For Jennifer, this opportunity has been life changing.



“This job has absolutely helped me feel more confident in who I am,” she shared. “When I got here, I had no self-worth. I had lost all of that from choices I had made. Goodwill gave me a second chance, and it’s given me back my confidence and my sense of purpose.”

Jennifer’s story is one of resilience and redemption. After facing significant challenges in her past, she was open about her history from the beginning. “I was honest about everything,” she said. “And everyone—my coworkers, my supervisors, even the customers—has treated me with respect. There’s no judgment here, and that means the world to me.”

Tara Barnes, Program Manager at Goodwill Industries of Mississippi, has witnessed Jennifer’s growth firsthand. “Jennifer represents exactly why our partnership with MDRS matters,” Barnes said. “She came in with motivation, honesty, and the willingness to work hard. Through this collaboration, we’re able to match people with opportunities that not only help them succeed but also strengthen our workplaces.”

Goodwill has worked alongside MDRS since 1957, offering training, work assessments, and job placements that

promote inclusion and independence. Over the past few years alone, more than 60 individuals have been hired through this partnership.

“When it comes to accommodations, we work closely with MDRS to make sure each employee has what they need to succeed,” Barnes explained. “Sometimes that means small adjustments like workspace flexibility or task modifications but it makes a big difference. The partnership helps us focus on people’s abilities, not their barriers.”

Jennifer has set her sights on a brighter future. “My goal is to earn my high school diploma,” she said. “And maybe one day, I’d like to be a store manager.”

For others facing barriers to employment, Jennifer offers heartfelt advice: “Be honest and open about your needs. There are so many opportunities out there through MDRS and Goodwill, you just have to take that first step. You never know what you’re capable of until you try.”

Barnes agrees. “To any business owner who’s unsure about hiring someone with a disability, just do it,” she said. “It’s a life-changing experience for the employee and for your entire team. You’ll see loyalty, dedication, and heart like never before.”

As for Jennifer, she says she’s simply thankful for the chance to prove herself and grow. “Goodwill and MDRS gave me a platform to flourish,” she said. “They loved me back to life. And I’m so grateful.”

Growing Confidence at Williamson Nursery



For Randy Quinn, working at Williamson Nursery in Summit has been more than just a job, it’s been an opportunity to learn, grow, and gain confidence through meaningful work.

Randy came to the nursery through the support of the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS), which connects individuals with disabilities to employers who value inclusion and opportunity.

“My favorite part of the job is potting plants,” Randy said with a smile. “I water plants, pot flowers, and work across the street in the landscape yard. I’ve learned a lot since I started working here because I didn’t know much about plants before. Now I really enjoy it.”

Randy’s days are filled with activity such as watering, planting, and helping keep the nursery’s lush grounds thriving. But beyond the daily tasks, the job has helped him discover new skills and build confidence in his abilities.

“Working here has made me feel more comfortable,” Randy shared. “Everyone treats me good, and I’ve learned a lot about responsibility.”

For Stephen Porter, owner of Williamson Nursery, the experience of working with MDRS and employees like Randy has been both rewarding and eye-opening.

“We’ve been in business about ten years now,” Porter said. “We’re a retail nursery, and we grow some wholesale too, we even make our own dirt. When MDRS first reached out to us, I didn’t know much about the program, but I was open to giving it a chance. And I’m really glad I did.”

From the start, Porter was impressed with Randy’s attitude and work ethic.

“Randy made it very easy on me,” he explained. “He’s quiet, but he listens, he learns, and he wants to do a good job. He’s been super nice, willing to grow, and really makes progress every week.”

One special moment that stands out for Porter is when Randy planted a tree in the nursery’s garden, a tradition for every new

employee.

"We plant something in the garden for each employee and name it after them," Porter said. "Randy planted his tree, and I told him it was his job to take care of it. A week later, he came up to me and said, 'Hey, my tree's doing good.' That moment showed me he was really connected to what we were doing, it meant something to him."

For Porter, working with MDRS has been an easy, rewarding process that benefits both his business and his employees.

"The process has been very easy," he said. "There's some paperwork, but it's no different than what I'd do with any employee. The weekly progress check-ins actually help me stay engaged and make sure we're supporting Randy the right way. MDRS has been great to work with, helpful, patient, and always available."

When asked what he'd tell other small business owners about partnering with MDRS, Porter didn't hesitate.

"We all need a chance," he said. "Just because someone has a disability doesn't mean they should be written off. Be willing to take the time to give them an opportunity. You'll learn a lot, not just about them, but about yourself and your team."

For Randy Quinn, that opportunity has meant independence, growth, and pride in a job well done.

"I would recommend this program to anyone," Randy said. "It's a really good opportunity."

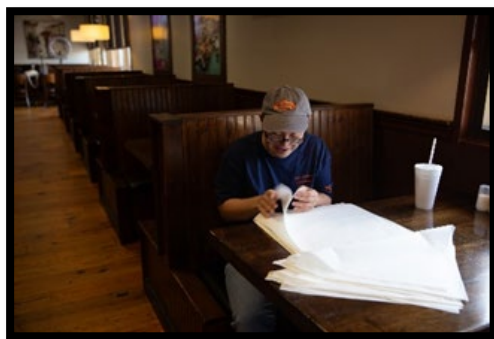
At Williamson Nursery, the plants aren't the only things growing so are the people who work there.

Finding Purpose and Belonging: Spencer and Tyler Thrive at Tellini's in Tupelo

With support from the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS), Spencer Kirkpatrick and Tyler Thompson have found more than jobs at Tellini's in Tupelo—they've found belonging, confidence, and a chance to shine. Through their hard work and joyful spirits, these two employees have become an essential part of the restaurant's success story, showing how inclusive employment benefits everyone from employees, businesses, and the community alike.

Sarah Floyd, the restaurant's marketing manager, shared that MDRS has been an incredible partner in helping Tellini's create a supportive environment for employees with unique needs. "MDRS adapts with us," she explained. "If we need tools, strategies, or even different approaches for training, they are right there to help. They make it easier for us as a business to ensure our employees have the tools they need to succeed."

Sarah shared how Spencer and Tyler differ but equally bring both hard work and joy to the restaurant.



❖ Spencer works in the dining area, greeting customers, folding napkins, clearing tables, and even helping deliver food. Known for his cheerful personality, Spencer says his favorite part of the job is simple: *"Happy, happy, happy."* Customers often come in just to see him, and children especially love interacting with him.

❖ Tyler prefers working behind the scenes. Every morning, he sweeps the parking lot, mops floors, and prepares food items like dressing cups, pizza crust, and his favorite fresh bread. *"I butter the bread,"* Tyler said proudly, describing his daily routine. His coworkers encourage and support him, and he says the job has made him more confident.



For Sarah and her team, the experience has been transformative. “The biggest lesson has been patience and adaptation,” she said. “We’ve learned to try new things, adjust, and meet each individual where they are. Even if something doesn’t work out the first time, it gives us a roadmap for the future.”

The impact extends beyond the restaurant staff. Customers often notice and embrace the inclusive culture. “Some may be caught off guard at first,” Sarah admitted, “but then they show patience and understanding. Our whole community is becoming more aware and more open.”

For families, the impact is deeply meaningful. Sarah shared that parents often express gratitude: “They tell us, ‘Thank you for giving us hope.’ For so many young adults with disabilities, opportunities after high school are limited. To see their children working, growing, and being valued—that’s everything.”

The difference in the lives of employees like Spencer and Tyler is undeniable. Both have grown in confidence, developed new skills, and found purpose in their work. Families express gratitude that their loved ones have a place where they are valued.

Sarah summed it up best: “Working with MDRS has opened our eyes to what’s possible. These employees bring so much to our team, and MDRS makes it possible for us to give them the support they deserve. It’s about more than just a job—it’s about community, understanding, and opportunity.”

OVRB Success Stories – *Client Spotlight*

Eddie Turner



Eddie Turner joined the Randolph-Sheppard program in 1987 after graduating from the Mississippi School for the Blind. “It’s the perception that I can’t do something that makes me try harder. I go the extra mile because I want everything to be perfect; I don’t want any excuses,” said Turner, an entrepreneur who is legally blind and manages the food services contract at Naval Air Station (NAS) Meridian through the Randolph-Sheppard Act. After nearly two decades of serving in cafeterias at facilities across Mississippi, Turner was awarded the contract to bring his expertise to NAS Meridian in 2005.

In 2025, Turner’s team won the Captain Edward F. Ney Memorial Food Service Award, one of the most prestigious honors for a naval cafeteria. He attributes the success of his operation to the dedication of his team, as well as the support from the Business Enterprise Program (BEP), which has allowed him to pursue new opportunities such as 8A certification. NAS Meridian’s food services have also received a five-star rating for the past 16 years.

Turner and his crew served over 330,000 meals to service members and their families last year, and he is looking forward to using his newly acquired 8A certification to continue expanding operations.

John Bellew

Finding Confidence Again: Bellew’s Journey to Independent Living

Independent living skills are often the difference between simply getting through the day and truly living it. For John Bellew, a Long Beach resident diagnosed with legal blindness due to Diabetic Retinopathy and Glaucoma, rebuilding that confidence mattered. Living alone in a small house near the water, he chose to share his story with MDRS to encourage others facing vision loss to reach out for the support they deserve.

To help him remain independent in his home and community, Bellew received a comprehensive low-vision evaluation, followed by low-vision aids tailored to his daily life. Through the Independent Living Program, he received a digital magnifier to read mail and documents, a folding white cane for safe travel, and a talking watch and clock to help him keep track of time—all simple tools that make a powerful difference.

Bellew also took part in Structured Discovery Adjustment to Blindness training and Orientation and Mobility training at the Mississippi EMERGE Center in Long Beach. There, he learned to build the skills that form the foundation of independent living: Home Management, Assistive Technology, Braille, and safe cane travel. He practiced preparing meals, cleaning his home, navigating unfamiliar environments, and reading Braille—using non-visual techniques meant to stay with him no matter how his vision changes.

One moment stands out for him: confidently navigating around a restaurant on his own, using the skills learned during Orientation and Mobility class. It was a milestone that proved the training was working—and that independence was still possible.

Bellew was also active in low-vision peer support groups, which expanded his social connections and introduced him to community resources. He shared that the Independent Living Program “opened his world” by showing him he’s not alone—others in his community are living, thriving, and staying independent with vision loss.

Today, Bellew reports increased autonomy, self-reliance, and a renewed determination to continue living independently in his home and community. And as one of the first graduates of the MS EMERGE Center, he’s proud of the progress he’s made—and grateful for the services that helped him get there.

His story is a reminder of what’s possible when support, training, and courage come together: independence, restored.

Andre Baskin

Andre Baskin began his journey with Business Enterprise in 2019 where he received his license as a Blind Vendor for the State of Mississippi in September 2021.

After receiving his license, Baskin was awarded his first vending location in October 2021 at the Walter Siller's Building and the Mississippi Supreme Court Building. Baskin's vending of the Hour Café has been a bright spot in his life along with becoming the first blind vendor in this prestigious building.

Baskin credits his work ethic from his days as a high school wrestler to push through until the end despite any obstacle he faces. His hobbies include spending time with family, fishing, and cooking.



Patrina Pendarvis



Patrina Pendarvis has been proudly operating her Mississippi BEP vending route inside the Mississippi Department of Transportation building since July 2021. Born in Crystal Springs and now living in Jackson with her adult son, Pendarvis is the definition of steady growth and unwavering commitment.

She sharpened her skills through training at both the Addie McBryde Center for the Blind in Jackson and the Louisiana Center for the Blind, continually pushing herself to become stronger, smarter, and more confident in her work. Her leadership extends well beyond her business—Pendarvis is a former president and active member of the National Federation of the Blind and serves as a licensed independent LegalShield representative.

When Pendarvis is asked why she does what she does, the answer is simple: she loves helping people advocate for themselves. "I'm very passionate about helping people," she says—and that passion shines through in every connection she makes, every skill she builds, and every life she touches.

Robert Cotten

Walking in High Cotton – A Business Enterprise Program Success Story

"When I woke up, it was black," recalls Robert Cotten. "I couldn't see. I did not believe what had happened—but it was real." At 45 years old, his life changed in an instant when a softball traveling about 130 miles per hour struck his right eye. The accident left him blind, unsure of how he would support his family, and feeling hopeless.

"When this happened to me, I was discouraged because I was born working. I've worked all my life. So, with that coming forward, you meet E-N-D rather than A-N-D. The E-N-D was saying, 'It's over.'"

But Cotton's story didn't end there. Through the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS) and the Addie McBryde Rehabilitation Center for the Blind, he found the support and training he needed to regain independence.

"The A-N-D kicked in when a lady with MDRS by the name of Janice Barry introduced me to the Addie McBryde Center for the Blind. There, Rosie Gibson, was there waiting to say, 'Come in and let us just talk with you.' From that 'just talking with you,' I got a chance to be introduced to a computer—JAWS®. And to be honest with you, when I came out of high school in '69, the keyboard was the last thing on my mind. But I learned the keyboard. I listened to JAWS®."



With training, technology, and encouragement from MDRS, Cotten gained the confidence and skills to pursue a new career path.

Today, he runs a thriving food service business at Camp Shelby through the Business Enterprise Program (BEP), a program that provides legally blind individuals with the opportunity to become entrepreneurs in vending and food service.

The Business Enterprise Program provides legally blind individuals job opportunities to be entrepreneurs in the vending and food service industry. Cotten and his team serve three meals a day, seven days a week. Supported by his Project Manager and a staff of more than 30, he leads operations, ensures food safety, and supervises daily production.

For Cotten, serving the soldiers stationed at Camp Shelby is a source of pride.

“We show our appreciation by serving the armed forces and giving them the best we cannot just sometimes, but every day,” he says.

Through MDRS and the Business Enterprise Program, Robert Cotten has not only regained his independence but also created a meaningful career that serves others.

Visit [MDRS.ms.gov](https://mdrs.ms.gov) to learn more about the Business Enterprise Program and other opportunities for independence provided by the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services



MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF
REHABILITATION SERVICES

Opportunities for Independence

Your perspective is extremely valuable, and we greatly appreciate all feedback.

Please send direct comments or questions to:

Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services

VR Program Specialist – SRC Liaison

Post Office Box 1698

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1.800.443.1000

www.MDRS.ms.gov

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