



2024 Annual Report

State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)

SRC
State Rehabilitation Council

IOWA

Iowa Workforce
Development

Vocational Rehabilitation Services

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Letter from the Chair



It is my pleasure to introduce myself as your State Rehabilitation Council Chair for 2024. With over two decades of experience in Supported Employment, I bring a deep-rooted commitment to ensuring meaningful employment opportunities for all individuals in our state.

As the current Director of Services at Imagine the Possibilities and a serving member of the Iowa APSE board, I have witnessed firsthand the transformative power of vocational rehabilitation services. Since joining the SRC in 2023, I have been dedicated to strengthening our mission and expanding our impact.

This fall, I had the valuable opportunity to attend the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Council (NCSRC) and Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSVAR) conference in Seattle, Washington. The experience reinforced my belief in the power of partnerships and collaboration. Connecting with SRC members from across the country provided fresh perspectives on designing the future of vocational rehabilitation services and ensuring quality employment opportunities for everyone.

I firmly believe in the importance of our role in advising and supporting Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services. Through building strong working relationships, developing a comprehensive state plan, and conducting consumer satisfaction surveys, we can continue to enhance the services provided to our community. Our fundamental principle remains unchanged: Everyone has the ability to work and contribute to our economy.

I look forward to working alongside each of you as we continue to strengthen the Vocational Rehabilitation system in Iowa and create positive changes in the lives of those we serve.

Sincerely,
Eva Castillo, Chair, State Rehabilitation Council



State Rehabilitation Council

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Eva Castillo, Chair

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What's New with VR

Making Efficiencies & Improving the Workforce System



Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VR) has experienced many changes over the course of the last 18 months. During that time, it has found new opportunities to improve the workforce system for Iowans with disabilities.

Following the move from the Iowa Department of Education to Iowa Workforce Development in summer 2023, Vocational Rehabilitation Services got to work and spent considerable time identifying the ways that it could streamline its services.

Iowa's alignment legislation meant that, for the first time, VR would be part of Iowa's center of employment expertise, working alongside all other related workforce programs. Instead of referring job candidates to areas and services outside of VR's range, those referrals now go to colleagues who work directly with VR staff. This improved coordination is just one of the improvements that we've made:

Ending of Wait Times:

- For years, Vocational Rehabilitation (like other VR agencies across the country) prioritized services for job candidates based on the severity of a disability (Order of Selection). While this allowed VR to focus on those who needed services most, it also meant that a waiting list would also have to be followed. Due to new efficiencies and saved resources, VR was able to not only cut down on the waitlist, but eliminate it entirely so that all individuals can now begin receiving services as soon as possible. Between July and September, VR eliminated the waitlist for Most Significantly Disabled, Significantly Disabled, and Others Eligible.

Improving the Workforce System:

- Integration with IWD also means that VR now can focus better on partnering with programs that can provide like-minded outcomes for individuals with disabilities. One example of this partnership is Core Four – a pilot program that involves VR working with IowaWORKS, IWD's Business Engagement team, and all the other agencies who provide Title I services. Their initial successes are profiled in this year's report.

Changing Job Requirements to Match Today's Labor Force:

- It's important that in our efforts to improve outcomes for those with disabilities that VR also look inward to help do the same when recruiting and retaining our dedicated staff. That's why this fall, VR has proposed changing the minimum qualifications for the Rehabilitation Counselor classification to allow for candidates with a bachelor's degree to apply. Not only will this help drive more applicants to open positions, but it will free up capacity for other staff members.

Vocational Rehabilitation is excited about the future of an improved workforce system and the better outcomes it will bring for the Iowans we serve. For more information on the latest developments, visit <https://workforce.iowa.gov/vr>.

Dr. James Williams, CRC, ACAS
Division Administrator
Vocational Rehabilitation Services

Mission: Employable Podcast Episodes Featuring VR

[Looking Back With Dr. James Williams](#)

[The Future of Iowa's Vocational Rehabilitation](#)

IVRS Overview

IVRS by the Numbers

Program Year 2023 (Covers the Period of July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024)

8,459	14,757	23,216
Potentially Eligible Students Served	Job Candidates Served	Total Served

Potentially Eligible Students: Students between the ages of 14 and 21 that have a disabling condition but who have not yet applied for VR services (students would be eligible for Pre-Employment Transition Services and auxiliary aids)

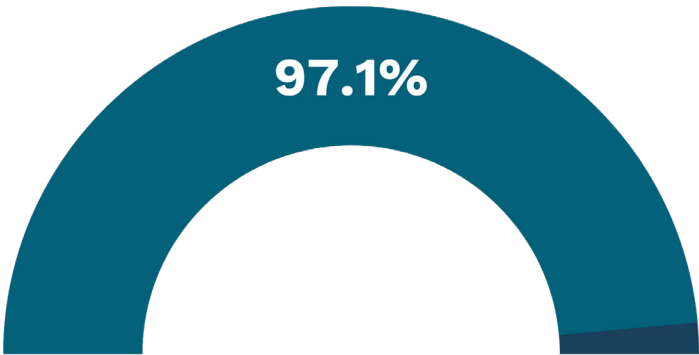
Job Candidates: Individual who has applied and has been determined eligible for VR services.

Data on Closed (Rehabilitated) Cases

1,734	27	\$16.36
Successfully Employed	Average Hours Worked Per Week	Average Hourly Wage

IVRS job candidates who were successful in finding employment reported **increasing their combined income by \$25.1 million** between the time of application and when their case file was closed. This is a **307% increase in income** compared to what was reported at application.

Iowans with disabilities served by IVRS in Plan Year 2023/Fiscal Year 2024 had an estimated income of **\$44.4 million annually**. This reflects **growth of nearly \$25.1 million** from increased employment and **over \$8.4 million** from increased earnings.



Approximately 97.1% of successful VR job candidates remain in Iowa – working, paying taxes, and contributing to their communities.

IVRS Overview

IVRS by the Numbers

Transition to Work: Program Year 2023 (Covers the Period of July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024)



1,734 VR Iowans with disabilities successfully obtained employment from July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024.

Top 10 Employers of IVRS Job Candidates

Hy-Vee has now been the top employer of IVRS job candidates for 12 years!

Employer Name	Total Hires
1. Hy-Vee Supermarket Company	112
2. Self Employed – Excluding BEP	65
3. Goodwill Industries	35
4. Walmart	34
5. Casey’s	32
6. Pizza Ranch	22
7. Fareway Stores	20
8. Kwik Star	18
9. McDonald’s	18
10. Mercy One	17

Ballard Student First to Complete EDGE Meat-Cutting Apprenticeship Program



Photo of Caleb at Fareway

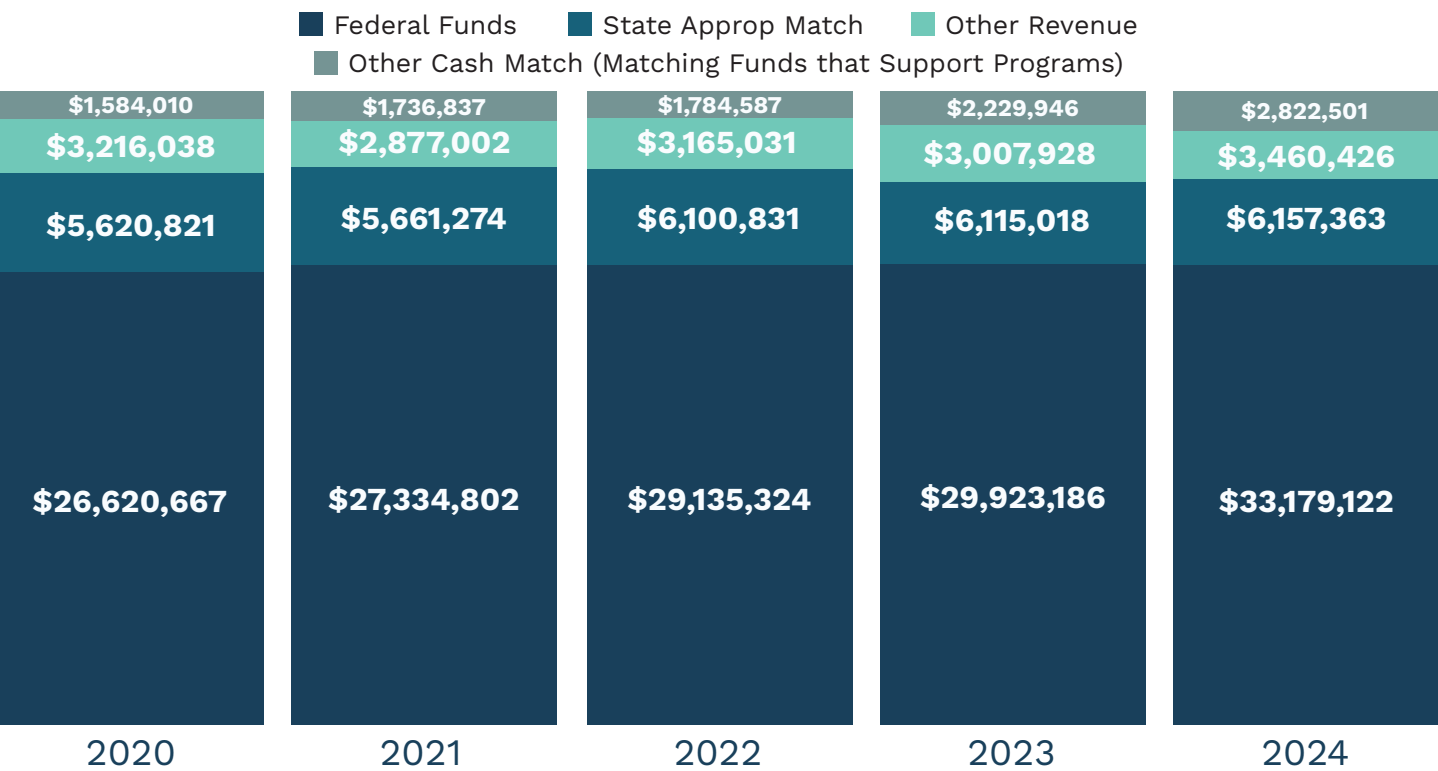
Congratulations to Caleb Isaacson, an Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation job candidate and the first person ever to be certified as completing an Iowa EDGE/Fareway Meat-Cutting Registered Apprenticeship!

The apprenticeship was an outgrowth of Boone High School’s “Boone EDGE” work-based learning program for high school students in and around the Boone School District. Iowa Edge partnered with Fareway to offer a meat-cutting apprenticeship to students within qualified school districts across the state of Iowa. The program encompasses the work-based learning initiatives of Boone Edge, Future Ready Iowa, and Executive Order No. 1 establishing Iowa’s Clearinghouse for work-based learning.

Financial Statement

IVRS by the Numbers

IVRS Revenues 2020-2024



IVRS Expenditures

2023 Top Expenditures

- Four-Year College or University
- Rehabilitation Technology
- Supported Employment
- Junior or Community College Training
- Job Search

2022 Top Expenditures

- Rehabilitation Technology
- Four-Year College or University
- Supported Employment
- Assessment
- Job Search

The Federal Government matches the amount the state invests into Vocational Rehabilitation.

IVRS brings in almost four (\$4) federal dollars for every state dollar invested in the program.

Eighty-one Individuals who were on public support for their living expenses are now supporting themselves, a savings of \$765,699 annually for the state.



Financial Statement

Helping Students Find Careers

Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services has a positive impact on linking our youth with disabilities to career pathways!

IVRS spent \$4.28 million on post-secondary tuition assistance in PY2023/ FY2024, helping students attain educational and occupational skills.

Program Year 2023*
IVRS served 14,342 Iowa Transition Students last year. More than one-fifth of all referrals (21.4 percent) came from Iowa school districts.

Potentially Eligible Students Served	8,459
Transition Students Served	5,883
Closed Files due to Rehabilitation	720
Hours Worked Per Week	28
Average Hourly Wage	\$15.33

*July 1, 2023 - June 30, 2024

2024 SRC Legislative Reception



NDEAM Across Iowa

Many events took place in Iowa for National Disability Employment Awareness Month. One key event was the NDEAM Kick-Off at True North in Cedar Rapids, which included a three-panel discussion on hiring those with disabilities.

There was also a four-part webinar series that covered different topics:

- **Assistive Technology:** This session introduced assistive technology, its resources, and how to use it effectively.
- **Autism Speaks:** This session shared resources and best practices for building inclusive workplaces for people on the autism spectrum.
- **Windmills - New Perceptions in Disability:** This session looked at common stereotypes about disabilities and discussed feelings related to these disabilities.
- **Accessible Job Posting:** This session focused on how to write accessible job postings, disability-friendly job descriptions, and inclusive marketing materials.

Many other events were held in Iowa for National Disability Employment Awareness Month, including those pictured below.

NDEAM Proclamation Signing

Governor Reynolds signed a proclamation recognizing NDEAM in Iowa. In Iowa City, Mayor Bruce Teague signed a proclamation with VR staff James Williams and Monica Brockway.



Dubuque Farmers Market: Mychal Moon

Iowa Self-Employment Program Metal Worker Mychal Moon had a booth display at the Dubuque Farmers Market featuring his metal signs.



NDEAM Across Iowa

More NDEAM Events

NDEAM Certificate Awarded at TJ Maxx in Ottumwa

In Ottumwa, an employer recognition certificate was given to TJ Maxx.



Mason City NDEAM

WIOA partner staff presented services to community leaders and agencies, highlighted by a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony by Greater Fort Dodge Growth Alliance.



Pre-ETS

Pre-ETS Summer Activities in Iowa!

Vocational Rehabilitation Services helps build job skills with summer programs

Students who are preparing to enter the workforce after completing school attended summer programs designed to help them both have fun and find a successful future.

Through the support of Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) host activities that help students with disabilities obtain an early start at job exploration and employment skills training. The summer programs provide activities for additional career exploration and job-training opportunities.

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors work with Transitional Alliance Programs (TAP) in schools and other partners in the education system to tailor the summer program for the specific needs and resources of students in their individual communities.

Students with disabilities ages 14 to 21 can participate in the programs through their local schools. For more information visit our website <https://workforce.iowa.gov/vr/education/students>



The Decorah Vocational Rehabilitation Office kicked off its Summer Program on Tuesday, June 11th by learning about careers at Vesterheim Museum and Decorah Fish Hatchery. Students were also able to learn about Norwegian history and complete an activity. IowaWORKS discussed the importance of teamwork.



In Sheldon, Counselor Emily Hoogland arranged for students to meet with the transportation coordinator at Northwest Iowa Community College to learn the process and requirements for getting a Commercial Driver's License (CDL). Students then were able to go through the pre-inspection checklist required by the DOT and go on a ride in the semi.



Students at Merle Hay Mall in Des Moines kicked off their six-week summer Pre-ETS program with a scavenger hunt. They formed small groups, asked businesses about job openings, and collected business cards and applications. Each year, the program culminates in a Shark Tank-style activity where students plan and pitch their own business ideas to a panel (See page 13).

Nearly 8,500 students were served by IVRS in 2024 with 21.4 percent of referrals coming from Iowa school districts for youth in transition. The Pre-ETS summer program is headed by Transition Services Program Manager Mary Jackson.

Check out the video feature on a Pre-ETS activity in Marshalltown:

[Summer Program Exposes Students with Disabilities to Career Pathways](#)

Core4 Profile

Core Four Brings Services Together for Successful Employment

Core Four is Iowa Workforce Development's year-old pilot project to boost coordination inside Iowa's premier workforce agency and improve the way job seekers receive assistance. Instead of individuals working independently with multiple programs to find employment, Core Four coordinates between those programs to find and combine the right services to support the unique needs of each job seeker.

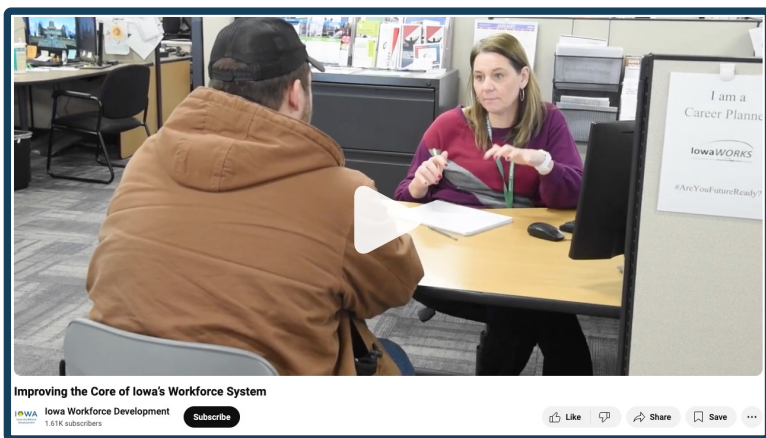
"If an individual is homeless and disabled, or if they are leaving the correctional system," different services will be needed, said Sara Bath, a manager at the IowaWORKS office in Des Moines. "It all depends on the needs. We're all working together, trying to brainstorm. Whatever they need, we bring in the support system to make them as successful as possible."

This deliberate, formalized cooperation is an outgrowth of Iowa's new state government alignment, which in 2023 brought a wide variety of like-focused programs together to be managed under the same agency. One such change was the transfer of Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services to become a division inside Iowa Workforce Development.

Bath said Core Four strives to place individuals into employment as quickly and efficiently as possible, regardless of where they first seek assistance: "How can we as a group of partners work to decrease the amount of time necessary to get to work once they are job ready?" The program is being piloted in Des Moines and Ottumwa and will soon include Waterloo.

As profiled in the following sections, individual success stories already point to the potential payoff of the Core Four model:

- Joe Scieszinski, who is on the autism spectrum, worked with Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Abigail Hovey to pursue a degree in accounting, and in February 2024 she referred his case to Core Four. Joe and Sara Bath began working on his job search, as well as making connections with employers and continuing to improve his interviewing skills. Joe gained confidence through the practice from mock job interviews, and he attended several AJC Workshops such as "Interview 101" and "Create a Great Resume." Bath assisted Joe in tailoring his resume based on each job he was seeking. In September, Scieszinski started working in an accounts receivable position at Holmes Murphy making \$53,000.
- Joe's initial journey was profiled in this agency video about the concept of Core Four: (Video at: <https://youtu.be/2xw6x2Drr98?si=klZ8iz0ymXuoqKqM>)



Core4 Profile

Working Together to Help Iowans with Disabilities Find Careers

Garrett Pierce is on his way to a promising career – thanks, at least partly, to a concentrated effort by several units of Iowa Workforce Development to cooperate more effectively in helping Iowans with disabilities find jobs.

Pierce, who has challenges with introversion and social anxiety, began meeting with counselors from IWD's Vocational Rehabilitation Services division in high school to help him better prepare for the workplace. After he graduated from Des Moines Area Community College with an associate's degree in information technology, vocational rehabilitation counselors connected Pierce with another part of IWD to focus on landing a job.



Sara Bath, who has worked with both Vocational Rehabilitation and as a manager in the Des Moines IowaWORKS office, said Pierce's case was referred to Core Four – a pilot program created to foster more information sharing between Voc Rehab, IowaWORKS, IWD's Business Engagement team, and all the other agencies who provide Title I services under the U.S. Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

Bath worked with Pierce to set up meetings with business leaders so he could discuss various career options. Pierce quickly decided that he'd like to pursue a job involving data servers, but he had no idea how to go about that.

"Clearly, he's a smart young man, but he can struggle with social interactions," Bath said. "Our biggest concern was his lack of work experience."

The Core Four team initially thought that some form of internship or work experience program would be the most helpful thing for Garrett. While they searched for ways to make that happen, Pierce took part in several resume and job interviewing workshops. Bath urged him to apply for several jobs each week. Shortly thereafter, with contacts provided by Erin Webb, a WIOA career planner, Pierce sought out and landed a position with Tek System, a temp-to-hire job service for information technology positions. He now works with servers at a Microsoft data center.

"It's been going pretty well," he said. "They've been training me... and they've been giving me more stuff to do on my own." Pierce praised the IWD teams who helped him learn "where I need to go, basically – what should be on the path."

"They really kind of helped me set some goals," he said. "If I have a goal to accomplish, I do fairly well. My problem is finding that goal and what I need to do."

In six months to a year, Pierce said, Microsoft will evaluate him and decide whether to offer him a permanent position. In the meantime, he's continuing to gather valuable work experience.

Self-Employment

Voc Rehab Helps Sioux City Man Roll Out New Food Truck Business

Richard Hull found the right ingredients for a successful career after working with the Iowa Self-Employment program (ISE) at Vocational Rehabilitation Services. In 2020, during the height of Covid, Hull launched his own food trailer, IBK On Wheels, serving smoked chicken, ribs, bratwurst, mac & cheese, baked beans and more.

“I’ve been cooking and catering for over 20 years now,” Hull said. “I started in the backyard with my uncle. I learned how to cook from my mother and how to barbecue from my uncle. We always had traditional Sunday meals and cook-outs mandatory every Sunday.”

Those meals on Sundays with his family got Hull through a long, rough childhood in Chicago, where he experienced poverty and crime. “I come from abuse, mental disabilities, living in abandoned buildings and much more,” he said.

His mother moved the family to Sioux City to improve their lives but died from colon cancer shortly afterwards.

“It broke me and my sister. I was already headed down the wrong path, so it got even worse for me. But I never stopped doing the Sunday and holiday tradition of cooking. I kept that alive.”

Hull struggled with homelessness and served time in prison. He eventually discovered that the recipe to turn his life around was to do what he knew best – cooking.

Hull wanted to own a restaurant and a restaurant revitalization grant in 2019 that VR helped secure, provided grant funds to purchase a custom-made trailer and equipment. He then started serving up his specialties at events and locations all around Sioux City.

Hull’s business was part of an individualized self-employment plan that was developed in 2019 after he began working with the Vocational Rehabilitation Services division of Iowa Workforce Development. A team that included Sioux City VR Counselor Tara Gunderson and VR Supervisor Brittney Gutzman provided specialized and individualized services including assistance with menu planning/pricing and communication.

VR Rehab Assistant Jamie Anderson and Sioux City Office Secretary Amanda Beougher helped order the specialized trailer and equipment for mobile food service. “I contacted the vendor who was building the trailer to make sure it would be built to the specs we needed,” Anderson said. “I made sure the purchase was going to be tax exempt and coordinated where the item was to be delivered.”

Anderson also had to work through purchasing and financial approvals for the purchases.

“Once he had a few soft openings, it was determined that some additional items were needed, so I assisted in researching the most cost-effective items and helped with completing the application



for funds to help purchase the necessary items,” Gunderson said. “It has been a journey, and he continues to learn and work through the process.”

VR ISE Business Specialist Yvette Clausen worked with Gunderson to get Hull up to speed on the various permits needed to operate a business enterprise on wheels.

Hull said, “Shout out to Angela Young and Tara Gunderson and Jamie from Iowa Workforce Development center for helping me and believing in me. Shout out to Yvette out of Des Moines for believing in me and helping me. Without all of them, I’d be still in the same spot. So, from the bottom of my heart to the top, thank you, and I will never stop or give up.”

When Hull catered an all-staff meeting at the VR Sioux City Area Office, the response was so positive that Gutzmann and Iowa Workforce Development Center Director Andi Mann arranged for Hull to park for free at the building Thursdays through Sundays. This is a key location, given its proximity to transit headquarters, factories, and the fire department. Hull also participated in this year’s Juneteenth Celebration in Sioux City, and continues to establish a vital business in the area.

The family tradition that held Hull’s family together, is now a business that allows him to support his own children.

Shark Tank Tests Business Launch Ideas

The Iowa Self-Employment (ISE) Program joined the Des Moines Area Office to provide activities for students in Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) to explore opportunities to begin or expand Iowa Businesses of their own.

To culminate the summer program in Des Moines, students split into two groups to develop business ideas, presenting them to judges Shark Tank style. One group created customizable, charging cell phone covers powered by walking energy, while the other proposed an underground subway to address transportation challenges for people with disabilities.

Yvette Clausen, Iowa Self-Employment Counselor Specialist, said the activity helps the students think about business plans, financing, production costs, sales and branding.

One student expressed a desire to open her own bakery, and Clausen agreed discuss planning for this type of business.

Clausen also invited previously successful ISE-supported business owners to talk to students about their own journeys to self-employment; featured guests were Jake Sahr, owner of the Mobile Barbering Co. and Maisy Murray, owner of MJM Jewelry.

The second highest number of successful job closures for VR candidates was through self-employment. There were 51 IVRS Self-Employment Closures in Program Year 2022-2023 and cumulatively, from Program Years 2016-2022, 332 businesses were successfully started, expanded or acquired with support from IVRS.



Individualized Plan for Employment

Student Graduates to Become Counselor

Scott Hostager's first experience with Vocational Rehabilitation Services and the Transition Alliance Program started in high school, when he began receiving Individualized Education Program Services. With the long-term support from these areas, the once-former student has now become a counselor. Scott has accepted a new position as a Case Manager/Mental Health Manager



"It was so enjoyable to get to know Scott more on a personal level through this process," said Vocational Rehabilitation counselor Brandi Fitch. "WOW, talk about bringing things full circle! This is what our work is all about!"

In high school, Scott used Pre-Employment Transition Services to explore his interest in computers and working with people. A Career Scope Assessment, given to him by Fitch, showed high scores in humanitarian categories, so Fitch helped Scott explore the social work field.

After job tours and job shadows and practice interviewing, Scott was able to get his first paid job. With help from Fitch, he then started a two-year social work program at North Iowa Community College.

Scott didn't stop there and transferred into a four-year program with Clarke for Social Work while working at Goodwill in a human services position. While completing his senior year at Clarke, Scott learned of an opportunity for interns at Vocational Rehabilitation Services. Scott applied and interned with the Dubuque Office until he graduated.

"I learned many case-management skills, as well as what it truly means to be empathetic with clients and meeting them where they are at!" Scott said.

Scott had exposure to a variety of clientele and aided in many intake meetings. He also helped with job coaching Voc Rehab job candidates at AMC Theatre, where he had worked at one of his first jobs in high school.

Scott graduated last May and is excited to begin working in his new position.

For Fitch, "It has been a joy watching Scott develop from an undecided freshman in high school all the way to adulthood – working first as an intern in our Dubuque VR office through graduation, and then to work within his chosen field of social work."

Scott's advice is, "I would encourage future interns to stick with it. At first it can be overwhelming, but the Vocational Rehabilitation staff are very helpful and are a hard-working team! I enjoyed my time with the internship, and it helped prepare me for starting my career."



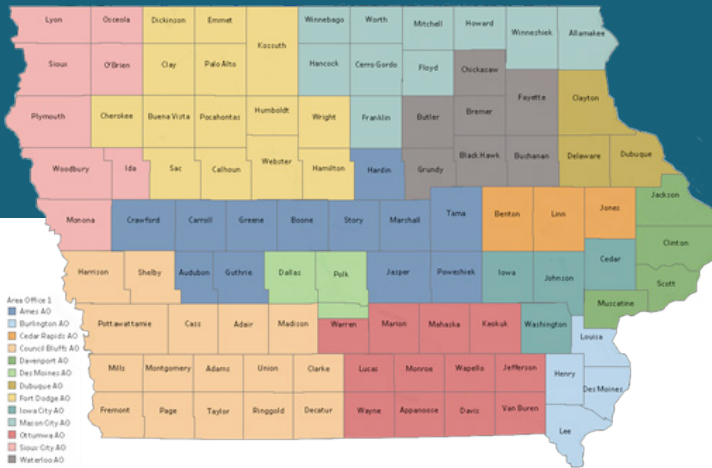
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