# VRS Community Partners Committee Key Messages

**Meeting Date:** Wednesday, January 19, 2022, 9:00am to 12:00pm

## Advisory Dialogue on the State of Disability Employment Services

* The committee discussed their experiences in an extended COVID-19 pandemic environment. Discussion themes are summarized as follows:
	+ The biggest and most stressful management challenges continue to be recruiting, supporting, and retaining staff. Staff coverage issues are especially difficult for off-hour services such as job coaching on evenings and weekend shifts.
	+ Lack of staffing is causing severe impacts to skilled in-home care services and memory care facilities as well as other senior care facilities.
	+ Housing and group housing are in crisis mode for many people.
	+ Committee members are also seeing an increase in homeless kids and schools with staffing shortages in paraprofessional and other support roles that acutely impact youth with disabilities.
	+ There was also significant concern for mental health for staff, for clients and for youth and young adults. Extended isolation is taking a heavy toll and there are often long waiting lists for professional mental health care. In some situations, people are accepting whatever service is available in lieu of waiting for the most appropriate services match.
	+ COVID testing can be time consuming, costly, and difficult to ensure at onsite locations. Community Partners noted that both Minneapolis and St Paul have also added their own testing requirements adding complexity to compliance with applicable requirements.
	+ Members noted they are inspired by the incredible people they work with and the dedication of their teams.
	+ Extended and severe staffing shortages have led to greater creativity and flexibility in staff retention efforts. Strategies used include permanent flexible work policies, higher wages and bonuses, a focus on organization culture, and flexible internal ‘floating’ staffing teams.
* VRS acknowledged the significant challenges and reiterated their commitment to working with the greater disability employment services network through these unprecedented times to help identify and elevate ideas and opportunities to address the crisis conditions and impacts.

## Preview of the Upcoming 2022 VRS Community Partners Contract Cycle

* VRS Director of Community Partnerships, Kim Babine announced that current VRS professional/technical (P/T) contracts will expire on June 30, 2022, and that preparations are underway to post a new Request for Proposal (RFP) for VRS P/T contracts soon.
* VRS Community Partners Specialists Anne Paulson and Janeen Oien provided a brief preview:
	+ Multiple state agencies including DEED, the Department of Administration’s Office of State Procurement, and the Minnesota Department of Human Rights are involved in review and approval of the various contract documents and processes.
	+ VRS anticipates publishing the RFP in February pending review and approvals. It will be posted on the VRS website, in SWIFT events, and an email notice will be sent. Once posted the RFP is required to be open a minimum of 21 calendar days.
	+ VRS is asking that community partners submit complete applications by April to ensure a July 1, 2022, effective date for their new 2022 P/T master contract. New contracts will be initially issued for a 2-year period with the potential to extend for up to three additional years. This approach is consistent with other state master contracts.
	+ The new application for a Professional Technical contract with VRS will include a section of questions related to a Community Partner’s commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI.) This section will include an attestation that the partner organization is committed to staff training practices that result in providing services that are culturally informed, affirming, and appropriate to the served individual’s lived experience. The State of Minnesota, DEED leadership, and VRS are all focused on a deeper commitment to advancing DEI growth within our work. The Community Partnerships team wants to advertise your agency’s diverse backgrounds and skills to better help our individuals make a fully informed choice of service provider.

## Enhanced On the Job Work and Training Options

* VRS is in the process of updating the services under the “On the Job Work and Training Opportunities” umbrella. VRS Community Partners Specialist Sara Sundeen and VRS Placement Program Specialists Maureen McAvoy and Evie Wold provided an overview of work to date on internships. Sara, Maureen, and Evie gathered feedback from CPC members to further the refinement of the services.

## Next meeting

Next meeting of the CPC is on Wednesday, February 16, 2022.

## For More Information

For more information on the CPC, please go to the [CPC page on VRS’s website](https://mn.gov/deed/job-seekers/disabilities/councils/cpc.jsp).