

VRS Community Partners Committee

Key Messages

Meeting Date: December 7, 2022

Review and Reflection on 2022 VRS Engagement Opportunities with Community Partners

- Committee co-leaders Kim Babine and Amanda Jensen-Stahl welcomed members and guests to the final meeting of 2022.
- As overarching context for the meeting, Kim provided a brief review of VRS' 2022 community partner engagement opportunities which included the VRS Community Partners and VRS Staff Forums, VRS CP Conversations, VR Learning Connections, the Metro Pre-ETS Community of Practice, Business Engagement Networks and the VRS Community Partners Committee (CPC).

Focus on Business Engagement Networks – Past, Present and Future

- VRS Manager of Interagency Partnerships and Business Engagement, Amanda Jensen-Stahl, provided a condensed history (~2008 to current) of engagement efforts focused on collaboration among employers, community partners and local VRS teams around the state.
- Known as Placement Partnerships until 2018, the Business Engagement Networks (BENs) bring together the efforts of DEED-VRS Placement Coordinators, Specialists, Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs) and School District Work Coordinators to identify a talent pool of candidates that meet the needs of business at a local, regional, and statewide level.
- There are approximately 15 active BENs throughout the state that are led at the local level by DEED-VRS staff who coordinate with CRPs and school districts to create a Single Point of Contact approach with Businesses. Additionally, the BENs are an opportunity to coordinate Pre-ETS services with DEED-VRS Pre-ETS Representatives, Transition Counselors, CRPs, and Businesses.
- BENs are made up of placement professionals from VR, Community Partners, and Schools who work together with the common goal of helping people with disabilities obtain competitive, integrated employment. These groups are all unique depending on their geography but share the same approach to serving business and the talent pool we support.
- During much of the pandemic, the BENs collaborated virtually. Today there is a mixture of approaches with some returning to in-person meetings, others using a hybrid approach and some continuing to meet solely virtually.
- Each BEN group is led by a VRS placement coordinator or specialist and assisted by others in the BEN group. Most meet monthly. BENs have focused their meeting agenda on inviting employers to attend to share information about their hiring process, current openings, and Q&A from the group. Other meeting topics can include training, sharing job leads/needs and time to collaborate and consult on placement cases.
- BENs strive to use the “Single Point of Contact” business model that designates a primary placement professional as the lead who develops a relationship with a business and is the conduit

between the business and the entire VR community. The Single Point of Contact assists the business in areas of recruitment, hiring and disability training or resource needs under the same approach utilizing a Single Point of Contact Structure to develop long term business relationships

- Job leads/needs, and successes are a huge part of the BENs. Ongoing and regular communication is encouraged to share information on businesses hiring, job leads and questions about businesses are frequently shared.
- Collaboration amongst VR placement professionals, Community Partner placement professionals and others who attend BENs is key. This includes being active participants and contributing on a regular basis.
- The advisory committee had an energizing dialogue on their experiences with BENs over the past few years with a summary of the exchange as follows:
 - BENs can provide effective and organized groups for community sharing and support. Members noted that BENs are especially beneficial for new staff, those in new positions/organizations/locations, and those operating in more solo/autonomous and rural settings.
 - Creating a trust-based collaboration is vital for lead sharing among community partners who might otherwise view each other as competitors.
 - With COVID, many BENs shifted to virtual settings which can add challenges to member bonding and trust levels if leaders are not intentional about building and sustaining strong connections. In one example, Google groups distribution was used by a BEN with multiple benefits including staying connected, sharing the work, and supporting collaborating.
- The advisory committee also shared their ideas on important employer related needs and opportunities that would benefit from collaboration in 2023. Here are some of the ideas shared:
 - Helping staff and employers understand and make appropriate use of the federal Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) as it relates to hiring people with disabilities.
 - Educating and/or reducing resistance from employers about the role of job coaching. Another job coaching related opportunity is addressing the variability that can occur across employers with multiple locations such as different stores in a big chain or franchise.
 - Focusing energy and strategies to gain traction within the manufacturing industry which has long been characterized by a generally low receptivity and record in hiring people with disabilities. Achieving greater inroads with the manufacturing industry in all its variety is a great employment opportunity that BENs could make a focus area in 2023.
 - BENs are conducive to hosting targeted, locally prioritized training topics and are also useful for deepening the integration of regional and/or statewide level training provided by VRS.
 - Bring in HR managers from existing industry partners and desired industry prospects to better understand their questions and needs as well as enhance working relationships.
 - Continue as an effective forum to connect employers with Pre-ETS and other VRS specialist programs including Extended Employment and Small Business Services.

Keeping VRS and CP Engagement Healthy and Effective in 2023

- VRS Director of Community Partnerships, Kim Babine, invited the committee to share their ideas for keeping VRS and community partner engagement opportunities relevant, energizing and a good investment of time for everyone. Ideas discussed included:
 - Members recommended strategic and integrated use of the combination of statewide, regional, and/or local engagement opportunities for joint training. Statewide training could be used effectively to provide broad-based, consistent information on topics such as the federal Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC), Disability Benefits - DB101, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), housing/homelessness, Medicaid/Medicare, and VRS services such as Minnesota's Extended Employment Program.
 - There was a lot of interest in taking a combined state and local approach to increasing access and hiring for people with disabilities in the manufacturing sector. Convening local engagement opportunities after a statewide perspective offering could activate local collaborations in taking a deeper look at their own specific labor and market data, trends and experiences to create local strategies designed for their communities and employers.
 - Another area of potential focus is increasing awareness, understanding and services for immigrants and intergenerational populations with different family structures. Minnesota is home to many who come from crisis, war, and trauma situations. Survival for people with these experiences can limit exposure to stabilized life planning and longer-term thinking. In some cultures, people with disabilities are not encouraged and/or allowed to work so perspectives and expectations for employment opportunities and civil rights can be very different from what they've experienced in other countries. There are also opportunities to educate and encourage people with disabilities and their families about employment options including small businesses as well as understanding compensation beyond the hourly wage through benefits such as 401(k)s, health insurance and other non-wage items.
 - Another related idea is to provide more resources to help employers better understand and tap into immigrant and newer populations of people with disabilities as an underrecruited source for good hires. Employer focused education could also include information on employer services and supports for recruiting, hiring, development and retention processes that are available through VRS and community partners.
 - There was a lot of interest in addressing the inconsistencies and opportunities with continued implementation of E1MN. Consistency is challenged by the numbers of counties, counselors, and locations that are all working to learn and coordinate services. Members cited a process improvement opportunity at the transition of the referral to either VR or waiver services.
 - Amanda noted that in addition to designated E1MN liaisons on every VRS local team, DHS is in the process of onboarding county waiver liaisons for lead agencies that have established employment liaisons. A joint VRS/DHS liaison training is being planned for early 2023 to assist with E1MN implementation.
 - The link for the lead agency employment liaison contact list: https://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/idcplg?IdcService=GET_DYNAMIC_CONVERSION&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased&dDocName=dhs-338410#

- Kim and Amanda thanked committee members for sharing their perspectives and experiences with the Business Engagement Networks (BENs) as well as the overall VRS offering of community partner engagement opportunities and options. VRS will use advisory committee insights to review and adapt community partner engagement strategies for 2023.
- VRS State Director and Committee Co-Sponsor Dee Torgerson expressed her gratitude to the CPC for their sustained and wonderful collaboration over the past few years with the added complexities of COVID and other challenges. Looking toward 2023, Dee noted it's important to recognize we have different challenges and new opportunities to work on together. She shared her excitement and deep belief in the value of healthy and effective collaboration among Minnesota's community partner network and VRS staff and teams across the state in making positive employment and community integration change possible for more people with disabilities.

Next meeting

Next meeting of the CPC is on Wednesday, January 18, 2023.

For More Information

For more information on the CPC, please go to the [CPC page on VRS's website](#).

2022-2023 VRS Community Partners Committee Members *In alphabetical order:*

- Anisa Ali, Lead the Way MN / Metro Region
- Kim Babine, VRS Director of Community Partnerships – Committee Co-Leader
- Michelle Basham, VRS Deputy Director of Service Operations and Partnerships – Co-Sponsor
- Anna Cahak, ProAct, Inc. / Metro Region
- Dana Eisfeld, Kaposia, Inc. / Metro Region
- Vanessa Gallagher, Tran\$Em / North Region
- Jennifer Germain, VRS Rehabilitation Area Manager / Metro Region
- Melissa Grover, KCQ / South Region
- Jay Hancock, VRS Regional Director Representative - South Region
- Kassia Janezich, Tasks Unlimited / Metro Region
- Amanda Jensen-Stahl, VRS Manager of Interagency Partnerships and Business Engagement – Committee Co-Leader
- Denise Johnson, PHASE Industries / North Region
- Randa Lundmark, VRS Rehabilitation Area Manager / North Region
- Chris McVey, VRS Deputy Director of Disability Employment Services – Co-Sponsor / Co-Leader
- Julie Peterschick, Productive Alternatives / North Region
- Robert Reedy, RISE / Metro Region
- Alanna Rice, Leading Prospects / Metro Region
- Karla Tauer, VRS Rehabilitation Area Manager / South Region
- Sarah Timmerman, Ability Building Center / South Region
- Dee Torgerson, VRS State Director – Committee Co-Sponsor
- Sheila Ward, WCI / South Region

Facilitator: Holly Johnson, Lanterna Consulting Inc.