

VRS Community Partners Committee (CPC)

Key Messages

Meeting Date: March 15, 2023

MN State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)

- VRS State Director Dee Torgerson introduced Tyler Sadek, chair of Minnesota’s State Rehabilitation Council and Karla Eckhoff, VRS SRC Coordinator to provide an overview of the SRC. Dee expressed her appreciation for the positive leadership and impact Tyler and the council have provided to Minnesota’s VR Program over the past few years.
- Minnesota’s State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) is a required entity created under state law and the Federal Rehabilitation Act. SRC roles and responsibilities are part of the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Across the country, councils were designed to hold state VR programs accountable. As part of that, Minnesota’s SRC weighs in on the Combined State Plan, which is submitted to RSA every two years. The SRC shares with RSA the recommendations it has made and VRS is required to respond to those recommendations.
- The SRC also serves as the voice of Minnesotans with disabilities to VRS – part of that is analyzing the effectiveness of services and participant satisfaction with the services they receive. The SRC does this in several ways, including reviewing data and by inviting participants to meetings to share their personal experiences with VR services.
- SRC members represent a wide array of individuals across the state and are appointed by the Governor. A majority of members must be individuals with a disability. In addition to appointments, the Director of VRS and one VRS Counselor serve as non-voting, ex-officio members of the SRC.
- The SRC includes representatives from Advocacy Organizations, the Federally funded American Indian VR Program, Business, Industry and Labor, the Client Assistance Project (CAP), Community Rehabilitation Programs, the Department of Education, the Governor’s Workforce Development Board (GWDB), PACER, Recipients of VR Services (former or current) and the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC). There is currently an opening for a Community Rehabilitation Program representative on the SRC.
- The top priorities the SRC is working on are:
 1. Equitable access to services
 2. Accessibility of services
 3. Supporting VR staff
 4. Getting the word out about VRS
- The SRC meets approximately 10 times per year. Meetings typically have an informative presentation about a specific aspect of VRS or disability-related topics. Topics are chosen based on what’s happening in VRS as well as interests of the council. Each meeting includes time for questions and recommendations from the council. Topics over the past year include Pre-ETS, Internships, Work Experiences, OJTs, Job Tryouts and On-the-Job Evaluations; VRS Placement, VRS Small Business Services, VRS Contracting, In-home Services, the White Earth Nation VR Program &

VRS Collaboration, VRS Budget, the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment, VR Staff Development, Hiring & Retention; VRS Quality Assurance Efforts and Updates from Field Staff.

- The SRC's latest annual report covering Program Year 2021 (July 1, 2021 through June 30, 2022) provides a lot of great information on the council and can be accessed with this link: https://mn.gov/deed/assets/2022-src-annual-report-acc_tcm1045-556065.pdf
- Tyler encouraged the committee to help spread awareness of the SRC and to promote applicants for representative membership. Information on council vacancies and how to apply for appointment to the council can be accessed with this link: <https://mn.gov/deed/job-seekers/disabilities/councils/rehab-council.jsp>

Customized Employment Updates

- VRS Deputy Director of Disability Employment Services Chris McVey provided the advisory committee with a brief history of Customized Employment (CE) which has its roots in the 1970s. CE experienced a renewal with the passage of the 2014 Workforce Opportunity and Innovation Act (WIOA) which emphasizes services for people with the most significant disabilities.
- In partnership with Occupational Development Center (ODC) and Minnesota's VR program, Marc Gold & Associates provided CE training in 2017. Chris recognized community partner pioneers Don Lavin, Jon Alexander, and current CPC member Dana Eisfeld, along with VRS staff John Dean and Margie Webb for being early champions of CE, a process that enables youth and adults with disabilities to find a job that is a good fit with an employer who values and needs the talents they have to offer.
- CE is a time intensive service model program and is not necessary for everyone. CE offers another approach when standard services are not an effective option. CE may be an effective choice for individuals with specific barriers moving from subminimum wages and seeking competitive integrated employment. With an estimated 4,000 individuals being paid sub minimum wages in our state, VRS believes CE can be effective in identifying talents, skills and abilities that are marketable to employers.
- To provide the CE update, Chris introduced three state leaders and early practitioners/trainers of Customized Employment in Minnesota: Margie Webb, VRS Customized Employment Specialist, Jolene Juhl, DHS-MSOCS Manager and Lindsay Alexander, DHS-MSOCS Supervisor. In 2016, as participants in the same Marc Gold & Associates CE training Chris suggested that VRS & MSOCS pull together interagency resources to develop CE training for DHS, VRS, SSB, and community partners.
- Drawing upon their own experience, the first curriculum for what became MN CE was created by Lindsay Alexander and Jolene Juhl (DHS-MSOCS) and VRS staff Josh Dean, Margie Webb, Marci Jasper, Maureen McAvoy, Michelle Chmielewski, Evie Wold, and Abbie Wells-Herzog. The training is based on the foundational elements of the Essential Elements of Customized Employment for Universal Application which was developed by Griffin-Hammis and Marc Gold and Associates.
- MN CE has been ACRE certified since 2018 and has been refined and adapted to 100% virtual training. To utilize VRS staff time, the federal funder RSA required a charge for the training. One of the biggest learnings from early years of training was the importance of pairing those learning CE with experienced mentors to help translate training into effective practices.

- Today training efforts continue thanks to a co-instructor model duo with Lindsay Alexander and Margie Webb. Margie and Lindsay provided an overview of some practical updates to Minnesota's nationally recognized CE training designed to expand access and reduce the costs associated with MN CE training. Starting in April 2023, training cost will be \$0.
- MN CE Training will be offered three times each calendar year, typically winter, spring/summer, and fall. The first 2023 cohort is underway and will complete in May. The second cohort is expected to begin on April 18 with the third scheduled to begin in September. Cohorts are open to up to 60 people and conducted virtually. Participants must commit to attend the full course. Priority for MN CE training applicants will be given to those undergoing 14-C dissolution and transformation.
- A pre-course video helps participants, supervisors, and agencies understand the time commitment and requirements before enrolling. Each participant must attend every session to obtain an ACRE Certificate and to be included on the national ACRE registry.
- Each participant attends 40 hours of classroom instruction and 30 hours of homework over 14 weeks of training. Students who complete the course will have learned and demonstrated the skills to complete the Customized Employment process with a job seeker. The 14-week course includes nine full sessions, with time to cover all the course materials, complete the homework, and participate in break-out groups that encourage students to engage, share, and learn together.
- Participants who are working with a job seeker completing a Discovery process during the training period will receive mentoring from an experienced CE Professional who will offer guidance, answer questions, and provide immediate feedback. MN CE trainers and mentors Lindsay and Margie are both still also active practitioners. CE mentoring is essential for practitioners to learn and provide competent CE services.
- Upon achieving ACRE certification practitioners may apply to Vocational Rehabilitation Services to receive approval to be listed on the VRS website for providing CE services.
- For additional information regarding MN CE Training, please contact one of the trainers:
 - Lindsay Alexander (DHS), lindsay.l.alexander@state.mn.us
 - Margie Webb (VRS), margie.webb@state.mn.us
- Community Partner representatives noted that one of the best benefits from CE trainings is the opportunity to shift the 'some people cannot work' mindset to one that starts with a belief that 'everyone can work'. Members also discussed the strategies for addressing some of the potential barriers to CE including the severe shortage of longer term supports/job coaching capacity. While we work on shortage of staffing across the system, members discussed working with employers and communities to build more natural supports in first 90 days and working with residential entities on transportation. Finally, the committee agreed that Customized Employment, like other VR services, all comes down to exploring possibilities and solutions one person at a time.
- Information about upcoming MN CE training opportunities will be distributed to community partners soon.

Next meeting

Next meeting of the CPC is on Wednesday, May 17, 2023.

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
- 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.

For More Information

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