2023 Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment Report

An Overview of Vocational Rehabilitation Services Needs and Strategies

101 E. 15th Street
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Texas Workforce Commission

Vocational Rehabilitation

2023 Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment

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Table of Acronyms

Acronym	Term
ACS	American Community Survey
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
BVI	Blind and Visually Impaired
CCRC	Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center
CIE	Competitive Integrated Employment
CRP	Community Rehabilitation Program
CSNA	Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment
CSP	Combined State Plan
CY	Calendar Year (January 1 – December 31)
DSU	Designated State Unit
ED	US Department of Education
EOM	End of Month
ESP	Employment Service Provider
FFY	Federal Fiscal Year (October 1 – September 30)
HHSC	Health and Human Services Commission
HR	Human Resources
IDD	Intellectual Developmental Disorder
IEP	Individual Education Plan
IPE	Individualized Plan for Employment
I|3	Information Innovation & Insight
LMI	Labor Market Information
LWDA	Local Workforce Development Area
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
OIB	Older Individuals Who Are Blind
PAS	Personal Attendant Services
PCI	Pathways to Careers Initiative

Acronym	Term
Pre-ETS	Preemployment Transition Services
PPRI	Public Policy Research Institute (Texas A&M University)
PY	Program Year (July 1 – June 30)
RCT	Rehabilitation Council of Texas
RSA	Rehabilitation Services Administration
SE	Supported Employment
SEAL	Summer Earn and Learn
SFY	State Fiscal Year (September 1 – August 31)
SGA	Substantial Gainful Activity (rate set by Social Security Administration)
SSDI	Social Security Disability Insurance Program
SSI	Supplemental Security Income Program
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math
SWD	Student with a Disability
TBI	Traumatic Brain Injury
TEA	Texas Education Agency
TVRC	Transition Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor
TWC	Texas Workforce Commission
TWS	Texas Workforce Solutions
VA	US Department of Veterans Affairs
VR	Vocational Rehabilitation
VRD	Vocational Rehabilitation Division
WINTAC	Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center
WIOA	Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

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Executive Summary

The Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) is a federally required report that evaluates the VR service needs of individuals with disabilities in Texas. Conducted every three years, the CSNA identifies goals and priorities for VR program administration and aligns with the state's Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Combined State Plan (CSP) to address workforce system needs. The CSNA provides the requisite assessment of VR service needs, in particular those of individuals with most significant disabilities, as well as the associated needs of TWC program staff and VR service providers.

The 2023 CSNA analyzed trends in VR services from Program Years (PY) 2020 to 2022. During this period, the VR program's employment rate increased by 3.3 percentage points, from 47.6% in PY'20 to 50.9% in PY'22. Lower employment rates in PY'20 and PY'21 were influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The growth in employment was accompanied by increased client service expenditures, reversing previous spending and service provision declines noted in the 2020 CSNA. From PY'20 to PY'22, the VR program consistently served more customers, particularly students with disabilities. Process improvements have led to higher participant creation rates, and TWC anticipates robust growth in VR participants.

VR Service Needs

The 2023 CSNA identified three overarching categories of service needs. Addressing these staff and stakeholder needs will be important for ensuring sustainable and equitable growth over the next three years, leading to more quality employment outcomes for Texans with disabilities:

1. **Provider Network:** supporting and training a robust network of providers to ensure access to equitable and diverse services;
2. **Staffing and Expertise:** recovering and maintaining sufficient staff and expertise to effectively serve job seekers with disabilities, including labor market knowledgeability; and
3. **Business Partnerships:** expanding and maintaining a diverse network of employers to recruit, train, and employ individuals with disabilities.

To evaluate VR service needs, the 2023 CSNA used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data on VR service patterns with qualitative insights from customers, TWC staff, service providers and other

stakeholders. Qualitative data sources included five virtual and in-person town halls, 16 key informant interviews, and the online PPRI VR needs survey administered by Texas A&M (1,074 total respondents). Quantitative analysis was based on data from VRD's case management system (ReHabWorks), the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), TWC Labor Market Information (LMI) reports, and the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

Provider Network

A key issue raised in town hall meetings and online surveys was the need for more informed customer choices and a wider range of service provider options. Key informants emphasized the importance of offering comprehensive information about providers such as available services, performance metrics, disabilities served, and staff credentials to help customers make informed decisions.

Comparing 2023 and 2020 CSNAs revealed a significant increase in feedback requesting ongoing provider training and support. Current providers sought consistent training on paperwork and continuous quality improvement. Key informants called for regional training to enhance consistency in paperwork and increase opportunities for constructive engagement with providers to give feedback and improve service quality.

A major challenge first identified in the 2020 CSNA is the limited availability of specialty service providers, especially in rural areas. Town hall attendees and key informants highlighted the need to attract these providers by adjusting contracted prices to reflect market standards. Additionally, there was a need to enhance employment provider qualifications for working with individuals with most significant disabilities.

Key informants also pointed out the necessity for capital improvements for infrastructure support in TWC facilities providing VR services to improve physical access for VR customers, including workforce centers and the Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center (CCRC). They recommended providing technical assistance and training to VR providers to better serve blind and visually impaired (BVI) customers, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) or autism, and to offer Pre-ETS services to students.

Staffing and Expertise

A major concern highlighted in town hall meetings and online surveys was the need for adequate staffing and expertise, with staffing and workloads being the most frequently mentioned issue. The 2023 CSNA found that the

Texas VR program experienced significant staff turnover: 13.9% in State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2021, 17.8% in SFY'22 and 17.3% in SFY'23. For comparison, the turnover rates were 14.7% in SFY'19, and 11.1% in SFY'20.

Higher turnover rates from SFY'21 to SFY'23, along with retirements, have led to changes in staff seniority. By the end of SFY'22, the number of VRD employees with 0-2 years of service increased by 17%, while the number of employees with over 15 years of service decreased by 15%. The median seniority for VRD staff fell to 6-10 years in SFY'22 from 11-15 years in SFY'19.

The shift in seniority underscores the need for ongoing training and mentorship, especially for new staff. Feedback from town hall discussions emphasized the importance of having subject matter experts and experienced counselors to serve individuals with disabilities. Key informants also noted that it takes about two to three years to fully train new staff, highlighting the need to retain trained employees by ensuring competitive salaries and benefits.

Town hall attendees stressed the need to enhance labor market knowledge among VR staff to provide a greater variety of career pathways. Key informants mentioned that VR counselors require more training with workforce centers to understand current labor market trends. Additionally, streamlining communication with Workforce staff to encourage co-enrollment of VR customers in other Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programs and leveraging Labor Market Information (LMI) was recommended.

There is a critical need for expanded labor market knowledge specific to VR, coupled with employer education and awareness to boost employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Key informants noted the increasing number of students being served through the VR program, emphasizing the urgent need for more transition counselors for students with disabilities.

Business Partnerships

Town hall meetings and key informant interviews revealed the need to engage more with employers to understand their needs and create more diverse employment options for VR customers. Key informants called for improved collaboration with workforce centers to form partnerships with businesses, ensuring job seekers with disabilities can meet business

demands. They also noted that VR counselors require more professional development to enhance their skills in engaging with businesses.

Key informants frequently commented on the need for more business relations coordinators at the unit level to develop job leads and coordinate with local Workforce Solutions centers. This would help VR business coordinators and local staff take advantage of emerging opportunities and maintain long-term business relationships. Together with town hall and survey participants, they also expressed the need to increase outreach and collaboration with business partners, particularly for customers outside of major urban areas, to expand career opportunities.

Summary Themes of the 2023 CSNA

Demographics of Disability in Texas

The number of Texans with disabilities is growing along with the state's population. According to 2021 American Community Survey (ACS) data, approximately 3.5 million Texans have disabilities, representing about 12% of the state's population.[1] Of these individuals, 49% were male, 51% were female, 33% identified as Hispanic or Latino, and 33% belonged to a minority racial group. As shown in Table 1, the roughly 65,000 participants served annually from PY'20 to PY'22 mirrored these demographics. About 33% of VR participants during PY'20 to PY'22 were Hispanic or Latino, 31% belonged to a minority racial group and 45% were female. Likewise, TWC-VR staff reflect the Texas Disability Population.

Table 1. Racial and Ethnic Distribution

Population	Hispanic Ethnicity	Racial Minorities
TWC-VR Staff	29%	35%
VR Participants	33%	31%
Texas Disability Population	33%	33%

Source: Texas American Community Survey Table S1810 (2021, 5-Year Estimates), ReHabWorks Tables (aggregate counts for PY'22), TWC HR data as of June 30, 2023

Per the ACS, 831,000 Texans with disabilities were employed in 2021, and 110,000 were actively seeking work, making up 46% and 6% of the total

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[1] Texas ACS Table S1810 (2021, 1-Year Estimates)

working-age population with disabilities, respectively.[2] For comparison, 41% of the US working-age population with disabilities were employed in 2021, and 6% were actively seeking work.[3] The number of Texans with disabilities actively seeking work in 2021 is estimated to be 46% higher than the 75,000 estimated in the 2018 ACS, as reported in the 2020 CSNA.

From SFY'20 to SFY'23, there was a 32% rise in referrals to the VR program. During the CSNA period of PY'20 to PY'22, the number of new VR participants grew by 32.3%, from 17,426 in PY'20 to 23,063 in PY'22. The higher number of individuals with disabilities being referred, combined with increasing participant creation rates, is expected to further boost the number of participants. TWC estimates that the number of VR program participants will increase, from around 64,900 in PY'22 to over 72,600 in PY'25.

VR Service Needs and Potentially Underserved Populations

Based on the results of the 2023 CSNA, the following populations are likely underserved populations who could benefit from VR services:

- **Individuals with most significant disabilities**, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or intellectual developmental disorder (IDD), residing in rural areas, who need access to specialized employment providers, transportation, and employers.
- **Individuals who are stroke survivors or who have traumatic brain injuries**, who need access to specialized service providers.
- **Students with disabilities living in rural or disadvantaged school districts**, who need preemployment and other transition services.
- **Foster youth**, who may not be aware of the Texas VR program.
- **Individuals with blindness or visual impairments (BVI)**, who need expanded access to independent living and specialized employment services to support their vocational goals.
- **Individuals receiving public benefits**, who need easily accessible information about how employment may impact their benefits.

Stakeholder Perspectives on VR Program Needs

Stakeholders and CSNA information sources identified a need for more informed customer choices and an increased variety of provider options. All stakeholder groups expressed the need for enhanced training on LMI

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[2] Texas ACS Table B18120 (2021, 1-Year Estimates)
[3] US ACS Table B18120 (2021, 1-Year Estimates)

utilization and tools offered by TWC. They also advocated for educating employers about the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities.

According to Figure 15 (displayed later in the report), respondents to the online VR needs survey highlighted several service-related challenges that hinder successful VR outcomes including: 1) lack of affordable childcare, housing, and transportation, 2) lack of easily accessible information about benefits and incentives, 3) employer perceptions of people with disabilities, and 4) lack of qualified service providers to choose from.

Customer Perspectives

During town hall discussions, VR customers voiced the need for consistent counselor support and reduced counselor workloads to allow for personalized assistance. They requested ongoing support for job readiness and professional placement. Customers also wanted more options for informed choice and specialty provider selections, particularly in non-metropolitan areas.

Staff and Provider Perspectives

VR program staff and providers highlighted challenges affecting service delivery such as shortages in provider availability, need for comprehensive provider training and ongoing quality improvement initiatives, and streamlining administrative processes for efficient service delivery. Counselors also requested for resources to connect with local businesses for support and collaboration.

Diverging Perspectives among Stakeholders

The 2023 PPRI VR needs survey revealed growing differences in perspectives between VR customers, staff, and service providers. For instance, the gap in the evaluation of service delivery increased. In 2023, providers had the lowest satisfaction ratings compared to customers and staff regarding service delivery evaluations. Highlighted later in Figure 14, VR staff were significantly less positive than providers and customers about the availability and quality of VR service providers. There was also a notable difference in perceptions regarding the challenge of not having enough qualified service providers, with staff more likely than customers to view this as a regular obstacle to success (Figure 16).

Addressing Challenges to Employment

Customer First Strategy

Current VR program strategies to address challenges to employment emphasize implementing the agency's rapid process improvement (RPI) principles. Projects based on RPI principles may help the VR program identify and reduce continuing inefficiencies in service delivery processes for customers and providers. In response to needs identified in the 2020 CSNA, VRD also implemented a cross-divisional business transformation project to address provider shortages, which is described further in this section.

One of the outcomes of the VRD's continuous process improvement effort is its Customer First strategy, which emphasizes evidence-based career and training services to increase both the quantity and the quality of employment outcomes leading to career pathways, increased earnings, and competitive wages.[4] Customer First goals include:

- Access to post-secondary education and training, including two- and four-year colleges as well as occupational and vocational training;
- Participation in work-based learning (WBL) and internship opportunities for both students and adults;
- Meaningful participant engagement with the VR program;
- Increase the number of students receiving pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS);
- Increase the number of quality employment outcomes; and
- Recruit and retain VR staff.

The 2023 PPRI VR Needs Survey highlights the significant role of post-secondary education and training (PSET) and job exploration and work-based learning (WBL) in VR success, as validated by stakeholders. Figure 11 (please see the VR Needs Survey section of the report) illustrates these findings, demonstrating the importance of academic and occupational training, and job exploration and work-based learning services on successful rehabilitation.

VRD made significant strides in increasing the numbers of post-secondary training and education services to customers, including graduate and four-year colleges, as well as two-year colleges and occupational or vocational training programs. In addition to providing work-based learning experiences

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[4] For comparison, see Raise the Bar: Postsecondary and Career Pathways | U.S. Department of Education)

to students with disabilities, VRD expanded work-based learning to include adults in PY'20. From PY'20 to PY'22:

- The number of unique participants receiving academic training (graduate, four-year and two-year colleges) increased by 43%, from 4,380 to 6,282.
- The number of unique participants receiving occupational or vocational training increased by 82%, from 1,396 to 2,536.
- The number of unique students and adults in work-based learning nearly doubled from 4,162 to 8,255.[5]

In collaboration with I|3, VRD developed metrics to incentivize regular provision of services to ensure participants remain meaningfully engaged with the VR program.[6] VRD saw five percent growth in the number of actively engaged participants, from 55,501 in PY'20 to 58,454 in PY'22. Correspondingly, the participant engagement rate (actively engaged over total participants) increased to 90% in PY'22 from 85% in PY'20. The discussion of Pre-ETS services is detailed in the section on Youth and Students with Disabilities below.

Table 2. Participant Engagement Rate, PY20-PY22

Program Year	All Participants	Active (Engaged) Participants*	Participant Engagement Rate
2020	65,024	55,501	85.3%
2021	64,972	56,908	87.6%
2022	64,857	58,454	90.1%

Quality Employment Outcomes

The overarching goal of Customer First is to provide quality employment outcomes for VR participants. VRD and I|3 have developed a quality

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[5] Based on data from the federally reported RSA 911 case service report. This report includes all types of services, including purchased from vendors, provided by VR staff, and arranged through a third party (i.e., tuition waivers). It also includes customers served through Pre-ETS statewide initiatives such as Summer Earn and Learn (SEAL).

[6] For a participant to be considered actively engaged, they must have received a meaningful service during the quarter (that is, arranged, provided, or purchased VR/Pre-ETS/Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center services; counseling and guidance; started or amended plan; employment (90-day clock); successful closure; or enrollment in education/training. In other workforce programs, participant cases experience automatic or soft closure after 90 days without engagement, unless a pause in service is explicitly noted as an exception.

employment index for successful case closures, which includes the following three measures:

- No decrease in earnings from IPE to case closure
- Health Insurance (public or private) at time of case closure
- Earning over the annual Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) rate, which is the cut-off wage for receiving social security benefits (SSI/SSDI)

During the baseline year of PY'21, 88.7% of VR participants who exited with an employment outcome met the first criterion, having earnings at exit that were the same or higher to wages at IPE. In addition, 72.4% of successful exiters had either public or private insurance at the time of exit (TWC does not track insurance status after the customer exits the program), and 65.3% had wages at exit that met or exceeded the SGA rate for the year of exit. Tracking these measures in subsequent program years will provide a framework to assess progress in providing quality employment.

It is important to note that one of the key challenges identified by respondents to the VR needs survey was concern about public benefit loss. Providing benefits counseling to customers eligible for SSI and SSDI helps them make informed choices regarding desired employment and wage outcomes. In collaboration with I|3, VRD has developed a quarterly metric to track progress in providing benefits counseling. In Q3 PY'21, when I|3 drafted a comprehensive quarterly report on benefits counseling, the benefits counseling rate was 22.9%, or 2,571 of 11,217 SSI/SSDI cases during the quarter. By Q4 PY'22, this rate had improved markedly to 69.1%, or 7,620 cases with benefits counseling on the IPE of the 11,020 SSI/SSDI cases for that quarter.

The increase in training services under Customer First has contributed to higher wage gains for participants. In PY'21 (the latest exit cohort with fully mature Unemployment Insurance (UI) wages at the time of this report), individuals who completed Post-Secondary Education & Training (PSE&T) or WBL services during participation experienced significantly higher median wage gains of $7,736 and $3,818, respectively, at Q2 post exit compared to their earnings at IPE. For comparison, the median wage increase for all successful VR exiters at Q2 post exit compared to the wage at IPE was $2,546.

Table 3. Wage Gains for Customer First Training Services, PY21

Service/ Attainment	PY 21 Successful Exiters with Wages Q2 Post-Exit	Median Wage Increase
Work-Based Learning	187	$3,818
Post-Secondary Education & Training	2,007	$4,820
Post-Secondary Credential during VR	771	$7,736
Reference: All Successful VR Exiters	8,976	$2,546

Moreover, comparative analysis conducted by I|3 shows that wages overall for VR exiters are increasingly competitive, and that the earnings gap is narrowing. In Calendar Year (CY) 2023, individuals who successfully exited the VR program earned 75% of the median wage of all working Texans – compared to 55% in CY'18.[7]

Customers with Most Significant Disabilities

As shown in Table 4, during PY'20 to PY'22, employment rates for individuals with the most significant disabilities were less than half of those for individuals without significant disabilities (36.9% versus 79.9%, respectively).

Table 4. Employment Rate for PY20–PY22 by Severity of Disability

Disability Significance	Closures	Successful	Employment Rate
No Significant Disability	6,398	5,112	79.90%
Significant Disability	39,186	19,378	49.45%
Most Significant Disability	19,507	7,196	36.89%

Source: I|3, ReHabWorks

VR's strategies to increase the employment rate for individuals with most significant disabilities include WBL experiences (both student and adult) and

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[7] Median wage calculations for all VR successful exiters whose fourth quarter after exit was in CY'23 or CY'18. The wages for VR successful exiters were removed from the calculations for all wage earners in Texas for a more accurate comparison. Source: Texas UI (Unemployment Insurance) wages and SWIS (State Interstate Wage Exchange).

supported employment (SE) services. As discussed in the proceeding section, an evaluation by I|3 shows that students with most significant disabilities may highly benefit from internship opportunities such as Project SEARCH.

SE services are used to assist customers who need additional and ongoing supports to succeed in the workplace. During PY'22, the success rate for SE services was 67.6%, which is almost 17% percentage points higher than the overall VR employment rate of 50.9% that year. Expanding SE and WBL experiences to more individuals with most significant disabilities will help to increase the number of employment outcomes.

Feedback from key informants highlighted the need for more specialized employment service providers for customers with most significant disabilities in smaller cities and rural areas. During PY'20 to PY'22, employment rates for customers outside of larger urban areas were significantly lower for customers with most significant disabilities. This is particularly true for individuals with the primary disability of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Intellectual Developmental Disorder (IDD), traumatic brain injury (TBI) and Legally Blind customers, who benefit from more extensive and specialized job readiness or independent living services that require physical proximity to a specialized provider. The lack of transportation and specialized employment provider availability in less populated and predominantly rural counties presents an ongoing challenge.

Providing additional provider training and support may have a positive impact on employment outcomes for individuals with most significant disabilities. For instance, VRD has instituted an Autism premium payment for providers trained by the University of North Texas Workplace Inclusion and Sustainable Employment (UNT WISE) program. Research by I|3 has shown that employment rates are significantly higher for customers with Autism who use premium providers for job placement and SE services, compared to those who use non-premium services.

Serving Students and Youth with Disabilities

According to data provided to TWC by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the number of transition aged students (14-21) receiving Special Education and 504 Plan services under IDEA in School Year (SY) 2023 to 2024 was over 389,350, compared to around 332,700 in SY 2021 to 2022 – an increase of 17% for the three-year period. The VR program has expanded total students served to meet this growing need. The annual number of

Students with Disabilities (SWD) increased from 23,175 in PY'20 to over 28,000 in PY'22, reflecting growth of 21% over the three-year period.

VRD has substantially increased client service expenditures (including services authorized in RHW and contracted Statewide Initiatives) from around 15.3 million in Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2020 to over 50.6 million in FFY'23. The unique number of students with disabilities receiving the required five Pre-ETS services annually has grown by 38%, from 10,748 in PY'20 to 14,813 in PY'22. Correspondingly, the proportion of students with disabilities receiving Pre-ETS services increased by almost seven percentage points from around 46% in PY'20 to around 53% in PY'22.

Table 5. Students with Disabilities Receiving Pre-ETS Services

Program Year	2020	2021	2022
Students with Disabilities (SWD)	23,175	25,127	28,101
SWD Receiving Pre-ETS Service	10,748	13,055	14,813
Percent SWD with Pre-ETS Service	46.3%	51.9%	52.7%

In PY'22, over a quarter of the services provided were Workplace Readiness Training (25.9%), followed by Job Exploration Counseling (20.3%), Work-Based Learning Experiences (19.9%), Instruction in Self-Advocacy (17.4%) and Counseling on Postsecondary Enrollment Opportunities (16.5%). It should be noted that eligible SWD who do not receive a Pre-ETS service in a given program year may have instead received VR Basic services, such as post-secondary academic training, or supported employment services.

Before obligating funds for authorized Pre-ETS, state VR programs are required to estimate the cost of required and coordinated Pre-ETS. The Texas VR program uses a projection method based on information provided by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and disseminated by the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition – The Collaborative (NTACT:C). In brief, to project future expenditures, the current average cost of required and coordinated Pre-ETS services per student is multiplied by the number of anticipated students needing these services in the future. That amount is subtracted from the Pre-ETS allocation. What remains can be used for authorized services. Please see further in this report for Authorized 9 Projection Methodology.

To address the expanding need for Pre-ETS, VR has taken steps to increase the accessibility of Pre-ETS. This has been achieved by increasing the number of Pre-ETS contracted providers and expanding the Pre-ETS offered through Statewide Initiatives such as Embedded Pre-ETS, Explore STEM, Explore Apprenticeship, Group Skills Trainings, Summer Earn and Learn, and Year-Round Work Experience. Based on information from heat maps produced by I|3, there is also a need to engage with customers in more sparsely populated, rural counties in the state ([Appendix A](#)). The VR Pre-ETS team has launched initiatives to expand VR's service delivery to rural and disadvantaged school districts. In late 2023, the ReHabWorks (RHW) case management system underwent a conversion to assign caseloads to potentially eligible customers who were not previously assigned. The intent is to engage more potentially eligible customers by including them on a specific caseload. In collaboration with I|3, VRD will work to identify potentially eligible customers who are still in the case management system and who may have received services in past program years but are no longer engaged with the program. Updating RHW to better reflect the actual need for Pre-ETS services will help in better targeting program resources.

Evaluation of Project SEARCH

In an ongoing effort to evaluate the effectiveness of services to students, I|3 conducted a comprehensive evaluation of Project SEARCH[8], which is a one-year business-led pre-employment training program that serves transition-age students and youth with disabilities, including those with significant intellectual and developmental impairments, with the aim of achieving competitive integrated employment. The I|3 evaluation[9] of Project SEARCH outcomes from FFY'15 to FFY'19 highlighted the program's positive impact:

- Project SEARCH participants had a higher success rate of 87.4% compared to 60.4% for non-participants.
- Project SEARCH graduates had an employment retention rate of 70.4%, compared to 63.3% for the comparison group.

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[8] Project SEARCH sites represent partnerships between TWC, host businesses, independent school districts (ISDs), employment service providers, local IDD Authorities, and Boards, along with their Workforce Solutions contractors. As of the end of PY'22, Texas had 30 Project SEARCH sites, each typically serving eight to twelve participants per school year.
[9] This evaluation included 452 Project SEARCH participants and a comparison group of 452 VR participants, all of whom exited the VR program during FFY'15 to FFY'19. The comparison group was sampled from the same management units and counties where their counterparts received Project SEARCH services. All participants were aged 18-24 at exit and had a primary intellectual or learning impairment that was unresolved prior to exit.

- Project SEARCH participants were 45% more likely to achieve a successful case closure and 11% more likely to be employed in the second to fourth quarters after exiting the VR program compared to other VR participants with similar demographics.
- Project SEARCH participants' median wage grew by about $2,600 over 16 quarters, compared to $2,100 for the comparison group.

Updated Project SEARCH Analysis for the 2023 CSNA

The 2023 CSNA includes an updated analysis of Project SEARCH, examining data from PY'20 to PY'22. Using the same methodology, I|3 analyzed the success rates of 500 Project SEARCH participants and 500 comparison VR participants. The results confirmed the program's effectiveness:

- Despite the overall decline in VR employment rates due to the COVID-19 pandemic, SEARCH participants demonstrated better outcomes.
- Project SEARCH participants achieved a success rate that was 17.6 percentage points higher than the comparison group.
- Participants with Autism had a higher likelihood of success compared to those with IDD. Training after placement was also highlighted as an important factor.
- Project SEARCH participants were 1.4 times more likely to achieve successful closure than non-participants.

Although the UI wage data is not yet mature and analysis is still ongoing, these findings continue to demonstrate the positive impact of Project SEARCH on employment outcomes.

Establishing CRPs and Other Service Providers

Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) and other service providers are vital in delivering services to Texas VR customers. The 2020 CSNA identified challenges, notably a substantial decline in vendors and purchased services. This decline increased the participant-to-provider ratio and wait times for services, and reduced referrals to vendors and options for VR customers, contributing to lower employment rates even before the COVID-19 pandemic in FFY'19. The pandemic exacerbated the situation, further decreasing employment rates in FFY'20.

Feedback in 2020 revealed dissatisfaction among providers and staff due to increasing paperwork and perceived procedural burdens. Concerns also included low reimbursement rates and inconsistent and declining referrals from TWC. In 2022, the VR program engaged Public Consulting Group LLC (PCG) to analyze fee structures and their business impacts. The PCG report

confirmed difficulties in attracting and retaining vendors, especially in underserved and rural areas, citing competition from school districts and the Veterans Administration (VA), which offer better compensation, and a burdensome application process for becoming a vendor. Additionally, lengthy payment processes and multiple paperwork rounds between providers and counselors contributed to provider dissatisfaction and attrition.

Business Transformation Project

In response to these challenges, TWC launched the 'Procurement and Provision of VR Customer Goods and Services' business transformation (BT) project following the 2020 CSNA. This ongoing initiative aims to reduce paperwork, streamline approvals, and enhance vendor retention and recruitment efforts. The implemented BT strategies effectively reversed the downward trends in provider and referral numbers, leading to a recovery in service delivery. As a result of targeted recruitment and process improvement efforts, VRD increased the number of active contracted providers while simultaneously increasing the numbers of customers served through these providers.

During the 2023 CSNA, feedback on paperwork and bureaucratic burdens significantly decreased compared to the 2020 CSNA. The activity rate for contracted providers increased from 51% in Q4 PY'20 to nearly 65% in Q4 PY'22. This indicates more efficient use of the available provider network.

Growth and Challenges in Purchased Services

Correspondingly, there has been significant growth in the number of VR customers receiving a purchased service from a vendor. From FFY'20 to FFY'23:

- The number of VR customers receiving purchased services from vendors increased by about 25%.
- The number of paid service authorizations (SAs) issued to vendors rose, from nearly 93,000 to about 113,000.
- The average number of customers served per vendor increased from around 5 to approximately 8.

This overall progress was driven by increased use of contracted service providers: In FFY'23, 704 contracted providers served 21,033 unique customers, while in FFY'20, 633 contracted providers served 15,095 unique customers. This reflects an increase of 11% in active contracted providers and a 26% increase in provider through-put (i.e., number of customers served per provider annually). Particularly strong growth in purchased

service recipients in FFY'22 (18.2% increase compared to FFY'21) coincided with across-the-board rate increases for contracted employment and pre-employment transition services. For contracted providers, the customer-to-provider ratio increase was particularly significant, from 23 customers per provider in FFY'20 to 29 in FFY'23. This increase in the number of customers per provider indicate improved efficiency in service delivery. Less provider paperwork allows for more direct customer service and fewer approvals enable timely authorization of services. The VR program is maximizing the use of existing providers by increasing the number of service authorizations and overall customers served.

Despite these improvements, the VR program still faces significant challenges given sustained growth in the number of customers. The 2023 PPRI VR needs survey identified the lack of availability of VR providers as one of the top challenges to successful VR. Staff and provider responses during the Town Halls and Key Informant Interviews also highlighted the need for more training support, improved communication, recruitment, and retention of service providers, particularly in rural areas. Customers emphasized improving the quality and timeliness of services.

For most disability categories, customer growth has been positive. Disability groups, such as BVI and IDD, show lower customer-to-provider and SA-per-provider ratios. The number of BVI and IDD customers with most significant disabilities receiving contracted services has tapered off or slightly decreased in FFY'23. These trends suggest that growth in purchased service recipients might be declining relative to other disability categories. Another notable trend is in Autism service providers. While the number of Autism customers receiving contracted services grew from about 5,600 in FFY'20 to approximately 9,000 in FFY'23 (a 60% increase), the number of contracted Autism vendors only increased from 292 to 365 (a 25% increase). This indicates a potential future shortage in Autism service providers.

As of Q4 PY'22, VR is leveraging approximately two-thirds of its contracted providers during a quarter, indicating some capacity for growth. Sustainable growth requires focusing on retaining existing providers, increasing the activity rate, and actively recruiting new ones, especially in underserved locations. Investing in training and support for these contracted providers is crucial given a higher level of expertise is needed to support individuals with most significant disabilities.

2023 CSNA Report Overview

Vocational rehabilitation (VR) services help individuals with disabilities realize their vocational potential and achieve career goals.

VR services include:

- vocational counseling and guidance;
- academic and occupational or vocational training;
- diagnosis and treatment of impairments;
- assessment of medical and vocational needs;
- assistive technology and equipment;
- disability-related skills training;
- job exploration and work-based learning;
- supported employment and related on-the-job assistance; and
- transportation, room, and board.

VR services are provided to help customers become employed in integrated workplaces that provide pay, benefits, and advancement opportunities comparable to those offered to their peers who do not have disabilities.

To ensure the quality of VR services, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, requires each state's VR program and state rehabilitation council to conduct jointly the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) every three years. This requirement has been continued by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014, which is the federal law that reauthorizes the VR program.

The CSNA emphasizes the following two populations:

- Individuals with significant or most significant disabilities
- Individuals with disabilities who are students.

To be classified as a student with a disability, a VR customer must be enrolled in a secondary or postsecondary education or training program and be younger than 22 years of age as of September 1st of the state fiscal year VR services will be provided. Per 29 USC §705,[10] for a disability to be considered a significant disability, a VR customer must have serious limitations in one or more functional areas and require multiple VR services over an extended period. To have a most significant disability, the VR customer must have serious limitations in three or more functional areas (for example, mobility, communication, self-care, self-direction, interpersonal

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[10] US Code—Unannotated Title 29, Labor §705: Definitions

skills, work tolerance, and work skills) and need significant on-the-job supports for the duration of employment.

Information Goals

The federal guidelines for the CSNA state:

> Per Section 101 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, the CSNA report must:
>
> i. "include the results of a comprehensive, statewide assessment, jointly conducted by the designated State unit and the State Rehabilitation Council (if the State unit has a Council) every 3 years. . . ." Results of the assessment are to be included in the VR portion of the Unified State Plan or CSP. The comprehensive needs assessment must describe "the rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities residing within the State, particularly the vocational rehabilitation services needs of—
>   I. individuals with the most significant disabilities, including their need for supported employment services;
>   II. individuals with disabilities who are minorities and individuals with disabilities who have been unserved or underserved by the vocational rehabilitation program carried out under this title;
>   III. individuals with disabilities served through other components of the statewide workforce development system . . . as identified by such individuals and personnel assisting such individuals through the components; and
>   IV. youth with disabilities, and students with disabilities, including their need for pre-employment transition services or other transition services;
> ii. include an assessment of the needs of individuals with disabilities for transition services and pre-employment transition services, and the extent to which such services provided under this Act are coordinated with transition services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.) in order to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities."

An assessment of the need to establish, develop, or improve community rehabilitation programs (CRPs) within the state is also required.

Organization of the Report

The next section of this report is an overview of the research methodology of the 2023 CSNA. Then, major themes of the 2023 CSNA study are discussed

according to information source (for example, town hall meetings, key informant interviews, and so forth). Although summarized in this document, the full PPRI VR Needs Survey report will be released separately. The last main section of this CSNA summary report discusses CSP goals and priorities that are intended to address VR services gaps and needs.

Methodology

The 2023 CSNA analyzed data from the VR program in Texas during Program Years (July 1 – June 30) 2020 to 2022. VR customer and service provider counts, along with employment and wage outcomes, are reported by program year. To align with TWC Finance and Human Resources reporting, service expenditures are reported on a Federal Fiscal Year (October 1 – September 30) basis, and VR staff data is reported by State Fiscal Year (September 1 – August 31).

The report used a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative evidence of VR service patterns with qualitative insights from customers, staff, and other stakeholders (especially providers).[11] The five principal information sources for the 2023 CSNA are the following:

1. **Five statewide virtual town hall meetings with in-person broadcast options** using the ZOOM webinar platform (92 attendees). An online SurveyMonkey town hall questionnaire allowed people who were unable to attend to provide input (11 respondents).

2. **An internet-based VR needs assessment survey** of customers, staff, and providers contracted with the Public Policy Research Institute (PPRI) at Texas A&M University (1,074 total respondents). This survey focused on satisfaction with systems, processes, and specific VR services.

3. **16 key informant interviews**, including three state office personnel, one VR manager and one counselor from each of the six integrated workforce service areas (12 total), in addition to one supervisor from the Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center (CCRC)

4. **Customer satisfaction surveys** conducted each SFY quarter for VR by Westat

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[11] Creswell, W. John (2015). *A Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research*. Los Angeles, California: SAGE Publications, Inc.

5. **Data from ReHabWorks** (the automated case management system used by the Texas VR program)

In addition, data from the US Census Bureau were consulted via the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) to create and assess potential VR customer and disability population estimates. Data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) was used to estimate the statewide special education and 504 plan student population. The qualitative component centered on textual analysis of town hall meetings and key informant interviews conducted from March – June 2023.

Definitions

To interpret the content of the 2023 CSNA report, it is important to define what is meant by a VR participant. A participant is a customer who:

- has signed an individualized plan for employment (IPE; the customer is considered "in plan"); and
- has begun receiving VR services in accordance with the IPE.

To facilitate analyses of customer groups and align with US Census Bureau practice, the Texas VR program's 2023 CSNA has adopted the *American Community Survey*'s (ACS) six disability-related difficulties, making slight clarifications in language to facilitate mapping to impairment subcategories from ReHabWorks. These six ACS difficulties can have a physical, mental, or emotional cause. ACS difficulties can be collapsed into three large categories for broad comparisons: mental and social, physical and mobility, and sensory and communication difficulties.

The ACS six types of disabilities are as follows:

- **Hearing Difficulty:** deafness or serious difficulty hearing without assistive technology and devices
- **Vision Difficulty:** blindness or serious difficulty seeing, even when wearing glasses
- **Cognitive Difficulty:** serious difficulty remembering, concentrating, or making decisions without assistance
- **Ambulatory Difficulty:** serious difficulty with physical exertion, walking, climbing stairs, and/or using arms and legs
- **Self-Care Difficulty:** serious difficulty bathing, dressing, or using small objects like toothbrushes, buttons, and eating utensils without assistive technology and devices

- **Independent Living Difficulty**[12]**:** serious difficulty managing high-stress social interactions, participating in local communities, or running errands alone, such as visiting a doctor or shopping

The VR program does not always internally categorize disabilities according to ACS categories. Instead, the VR program's disability categories are usually defined according to groups based on federally provided codes for each disability cause and subcategory. These codes allow for a nuanced understanding of disabilities and are not directly comparable to a singular ACS difficulty category (Table 6).

Table 6. Comparing Internal and ACS Disability Categories

Texas VR Program Disability Category	ACS Difficulty Categories
Cardiac/Respiratory/Circulatory	Ambulatory
Cognitive	Cognitive
Deaf and/or Hard of Hearing	Hearing
Emotional/Mental/Psychological	Cognitive/Independent Living
Musculoskeletal/Neurological/Orthopedic	Ambulatory/Self-Care
Other	Ambulatory/Self-Care
Other Chronic Diseases	Ambulatory/Self-Care
Other Physical Debilitation or Impairment	Ambulatory/Self-Care
Spinal Cord Injury/Traumatic Brain Injury	Ambulatory/Cognitive/Self-Care
Substance Abuse	Cognitive/Independent Living
Blindness/Visual Impairment	Vision

Likewise, Table 7 categorizes the internal VR disability categories according to the five major RSA disability impairment categories:

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[12] Note that an independent living difficulty involves only community and social interaction challenges and should not be confused with independent living services, which focus on eliminating barriers to living an independent life and providing self-care.

auditory/communicative, cognitive, physical, psychological/psychosocial, and visual (including legally blind and other visual impairments).

Table 7. Comparing Internal and RSA Disability Categories

Texas VR Program Disability Category	RSA Impairment Categories
Cardiac/Respiratory/Circulatory	Physical
Cognitive	Cognitive
Deaf and/or Hard of Hearing	Auditory/Communicative
Emotional/Mental/Psychological	Psychological/Psychosocial
Musculoskeletal/Neurological/Orthopedic	Physical
Other	Physical
Other Chronic Diseases	Physical
Other Physical Debilitation or Impairment	Physical
Spinal Cord Injury/Traumatic Brain Injury	Physical/Cognitive
Substance Abuse	Psychological/Psychosocial
Blindness/Visual Impairment	Visual

Summary of Research Process

The quantitative component of the 2023 CSNA centered on ReHabWorks customer information and other internal data sets for PY'20 to PY'22. The qualitative component of the 2023 CSNA centered on textual analysis of a series of five town hall meetings and an online town hall survey, together with 16 key informant interviews conducted during the spring of 2023. RCT members approved the research study design proposed by I|3 at TWC and facilitated town hall meetings. Later, the RCT provided input regarding CSP goals, priorities, and strategies. Other stakeholders participated in town hall meetings and provided feedback via the VR needs survey administered by Texas A&M, e-mails, and in-person consultations and meetings. Other stakeholders were represented among RCT members as well.

2023 CSNA Themes

This section overviews major themes from the 2023 CSNA and discusses implications for the Texas VR program. As required by the federal guidelines, identified VR service needs are used to develop the goals and priorities as agreed upon with the RCT for the CSP.

Demographics of Disability in Texas

Since the 2010 Census, the proportion of Texans with disabilities has remained stable at approximately 12% of the state's growing population. As of December 31, 2021, there were about 3,505,000 Texans with disabilities.[13]

Employment Estimates

Per the ACS, approximately 941,000 Texans with disabilities aged 18-64 were in the labor force in CY'21, of whom about 831,000 were employed and 110,000 were unemployed (actively seeking work), representing 46% and 6% respectively, of all working-age (18–64) Texans with disabilities.[14] For comparison, of the US population of working age people with disabilities in 2021, 41% were employed and 6% were unemployed (actively seeking work).[15]

Figure 1. Employment Status for Working-Aged People in Texas

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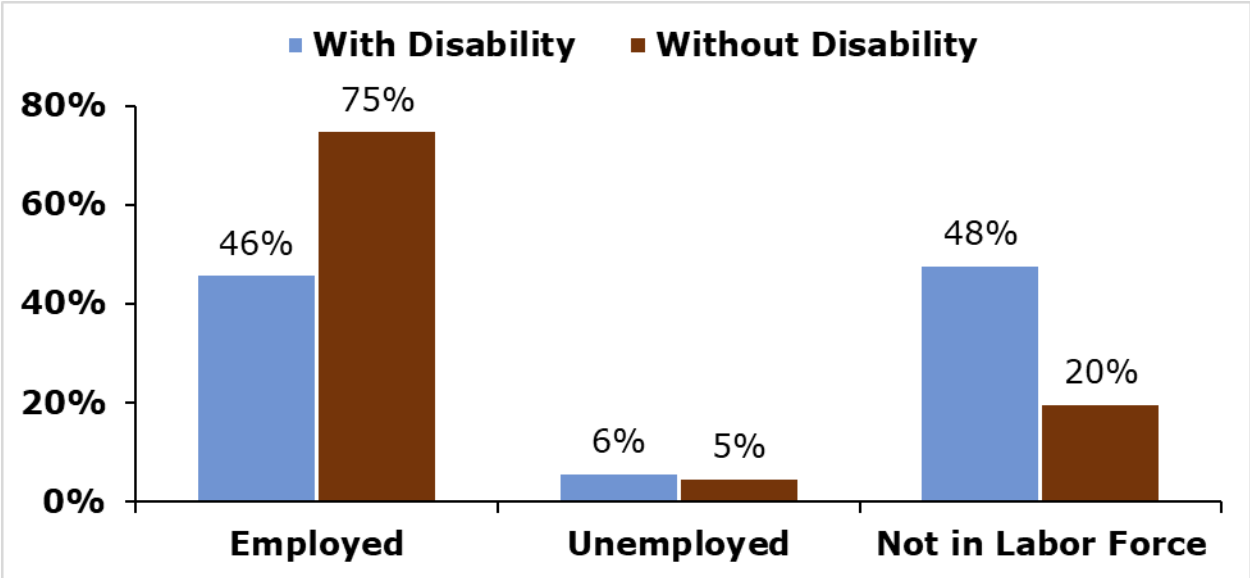
[13] Texas ACS Table S1810 (2021, 1-Year Estimates)
[14] Texas ACS Table B18120 (2021, 1-Year Estimates)
[15] US ACS Table B18120 (2021, 1-Year Estimates)

Figure 1 shows that 48% of working-age individuals with disabilities in Texas were not in the labor force during 2021, compared to 20% of those without a disability. Judging from this disparity, the need for quality VR services is evident. The Texas VR program aims to help more individuals with disabilities who are not currently in the labor force find employment.

Figure 2. Employment Status by ACS Difficulty Category in Texas

Figure 2 portrays employment status by ACS disability difficulty types in 2021. Individuals with vision and hearing difficulties reported the highest levels of employment, above the state average of 46% for individuals with disabilities. At the same time, around 55% of individuals with cognitive difficulties, 63% of individuals with ambulatory difficulties, 72% of individuals who reported independent living, and 78% of individuals who reported self-care difficulties were not in the labor force, underscoring the ongoing need for services to assist individuals with these difficulties.

Figure 3. Distribution of Disability Type by ACS Difficulty
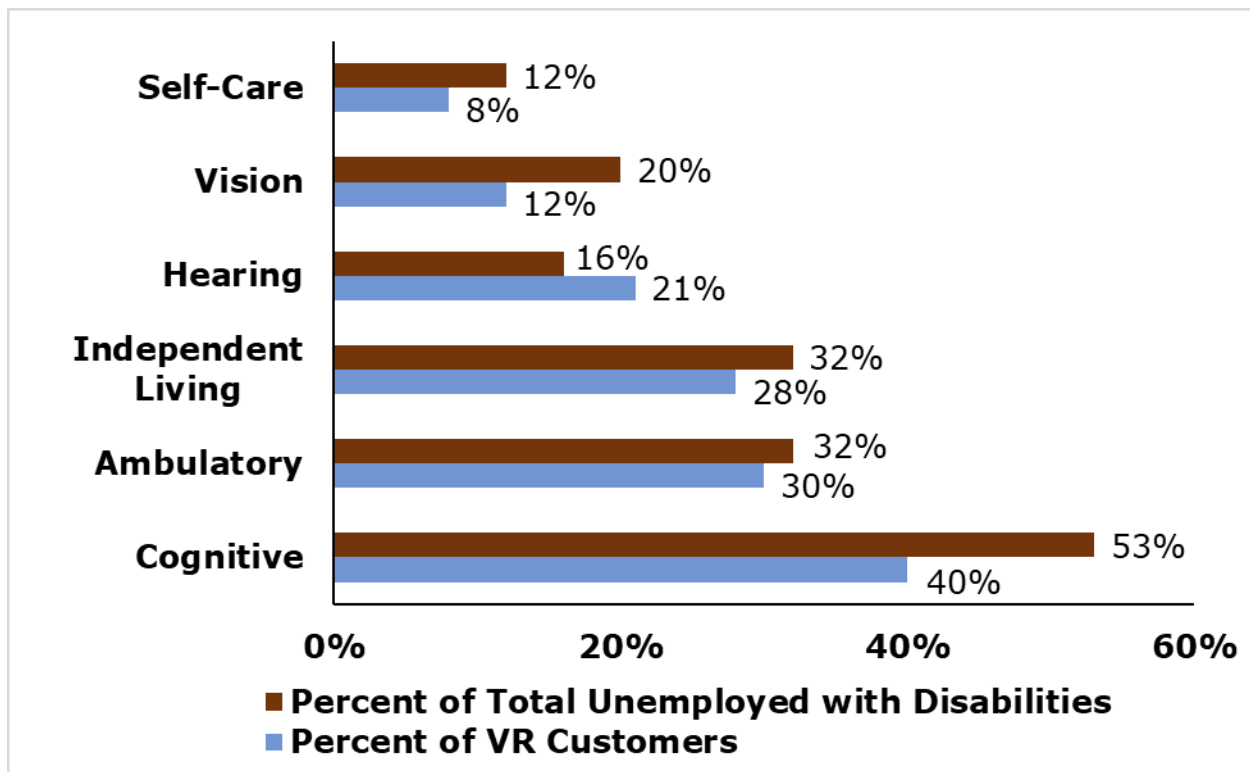
Source: Texas ACS Table B18120 (2021, 1-Year Estimates), ReHabWorks

Figure 3 is a snapshot of unemployed individuals with disabilities in CY'21 per ACS estimates, compared to VR customers during the same period. The disability difficulty proportions in Texas are generally comparable with that of VR customers during this time frame, suggesting an equitable distribution of VR services overall.[16] The proportional differences between ACS unemployment estimates and VR customers in CY'21 were somewhat higher for individuals with cognitive and visual difficulties, suggesting the need for increased outreach efforts to these populations.

Per the 2021 ACS, the total estimated number of individuals with disabilities actively seeking work as a percentage of the total labor force with disabilities aged 18-64 was 11.7%, compared to 10.2% prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, as estimated in the 2018 ACS. The comparable figure for the US in 2021 was 13.0%.

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[16] The grand total of ACS difficulty categories exceeds 100 percent, due to individuals reporting more than one disability difficulty. To align with the ACS, VR customer data for Figure 3 includes primary, secondary, and tertiary disabilities.

Disability by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

According to the 2021 ACS, approximately 51% of Texans with disabilities identified as female. As Figure 4 demonstrates, the proportion of participants in the VR program who identified as female is currently around 45%, and 41% of VR participants who are students identified as female.

Figure 4. Gender of Individuals with Disabilities
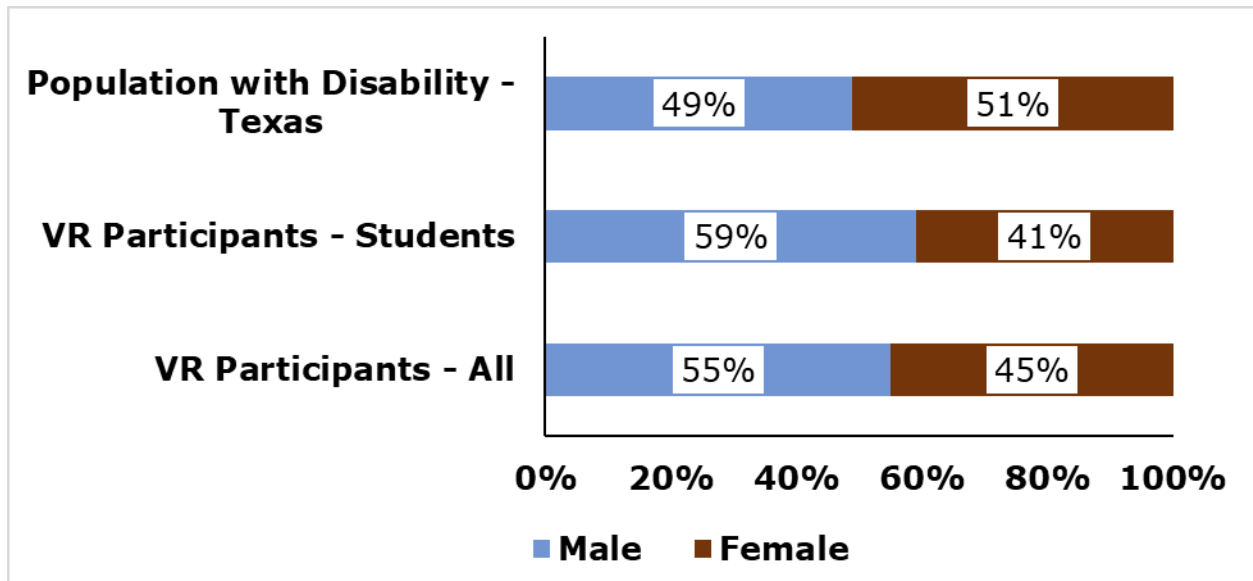
Source: Texas ACS Table S1810 (2021, Five-Year Estimates), ReHabWorks Tables (aggregate counts for PY'21 to PY'22).

The difference in the proportions for gender among VR participants is largely due to the higher prevalence of neurodevelopmental disabilities among the male student population. Around two-thirds of VR participants who are students have a primary neurodevelopmental disability, which is reflective of the Texas student population ages 14-21 enrolled in special education.[17]

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[17] Source: ReHabWorks and Texas Education Agency (TEA) data on secondary special education enrollment for the 2021-22 academic year. Around 60% of special education students ages 14 to 21 in Texas are male (not including students with a 504 plan). Among specific disability causes, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has relatively higher proportions of males. 82% of students in the Texas VR program with ASD were males.

Table 8. Racial Distribution, Texas Disability Population and VR Participants by Disability Significance

Racial Group	Texas Disability Population	VR Participants with Significant Disability	VR Participants with Most Significant Disability
Black or African American	13.7%	23.7%	23.6%
Two or more races (multiracial)	9.7%	1.6%	2.1%
Some other race	5.9%	3.3%	3.6%
Asian	2.6%	1.4%	2.6%
Native American	0.7%	0.5%	0.6%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%
Subtotal: Racial Minorities	*32.7%*	*30.7%*	*32.7%*
White	67.3%	69.3%	67.3%
Total	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

Source: Texas American Community Survey Table S1810 (2021, 5-Year Estimates), ReHabWorks Tables (aggregate counts for PY'20-PY'22)

As shown in Table 8, the proportions of VR participants with significant and most significant disabilities who belong to racial minorities are reflective of the Texas population of people with disabilities. The percentage of individuals with disabilities in Texas belonging to racial minority groups in 2021 was around 33%, comparable to around 31% and 33% of VR participants with significant and most significant disabilities, respectively. Note that the US Census treats Hispanic/Latino as an ethnicity rather than a racial group. For example, the percentages in Table 8 for White include both Hispanic White and Non-Hispanic White. The percentage of individuals identifying as Hispanic or Latino (of any race) in the 2021 ACS was 33%, compared to 33% of all VR participants during PY'20 to PY'22.

Texas VR Program Resources

The VR program offers services to customers through a combination of staff, VR counselors, and service providers. As of the end of SFY'22, the VR

Division had 596 filled VR counselor positions, including Transition VR counselors (TVRCs) for students and youth. Other staff positions, including teachers for blind services, VR technicians, and other support positions, totaled 925.

Workforce Sustainability

The VR Division at TWC had 1,521 employees as of August 31, 2022. As illustrated in Figure 5, the age distribution skewed slightly to the right from a normal curve, indicating an experienced and sustainable workforce. However, the center of the distribution was older than is typical for a sustainable workforce. The modal age range for VRD employees was 51–55, and approximately half of VR employees were over the age of 50. The age distribution suggests that there is a large cohort of employees who are approaching retirement age, which could lead to a shortage of more experienced workers in the future.

Figure 5. Age Distribution of VRD Employees
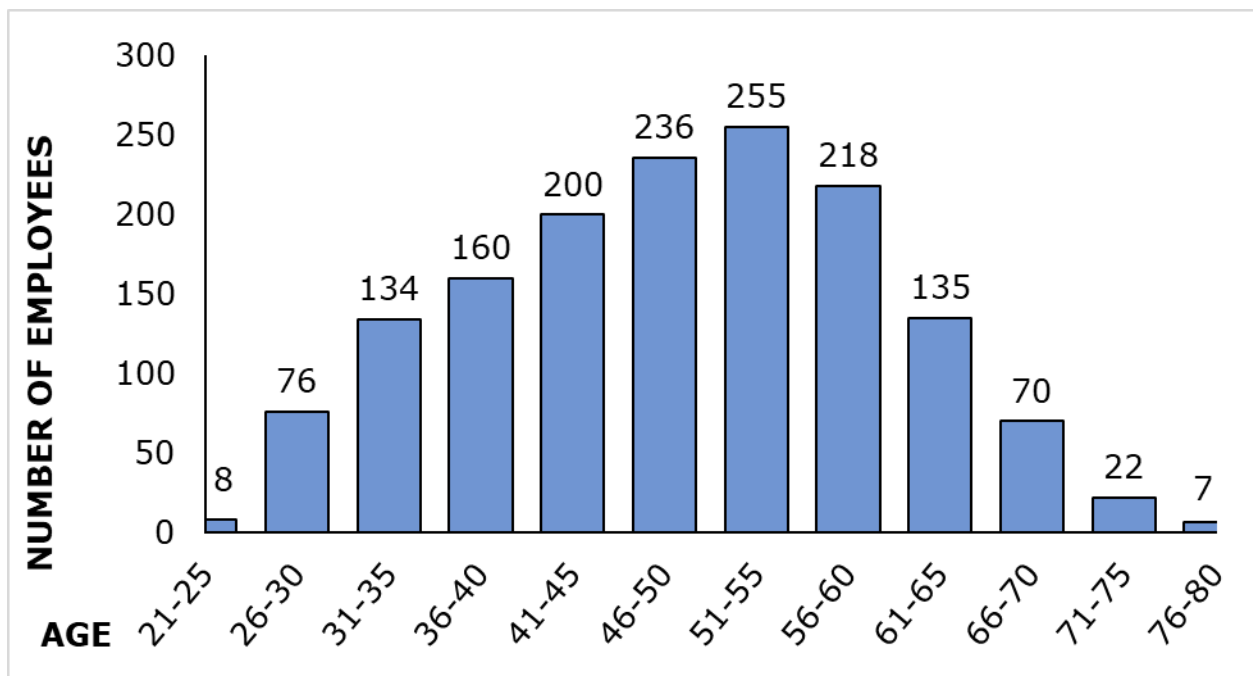
Source: TWC HR Data, VRD Employees, EOM August 2022.

Regarding employee retention, a significant proportion (47%) of employees possess tenure exceeding ten years. This suggests potential workforce sustainability challenges in the near future, as retirements and career advancements are anticipated. Furthermore, the modal range (23% of all employees) for seniority was 20 or more years of service (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Service Longevity of VRD Employees
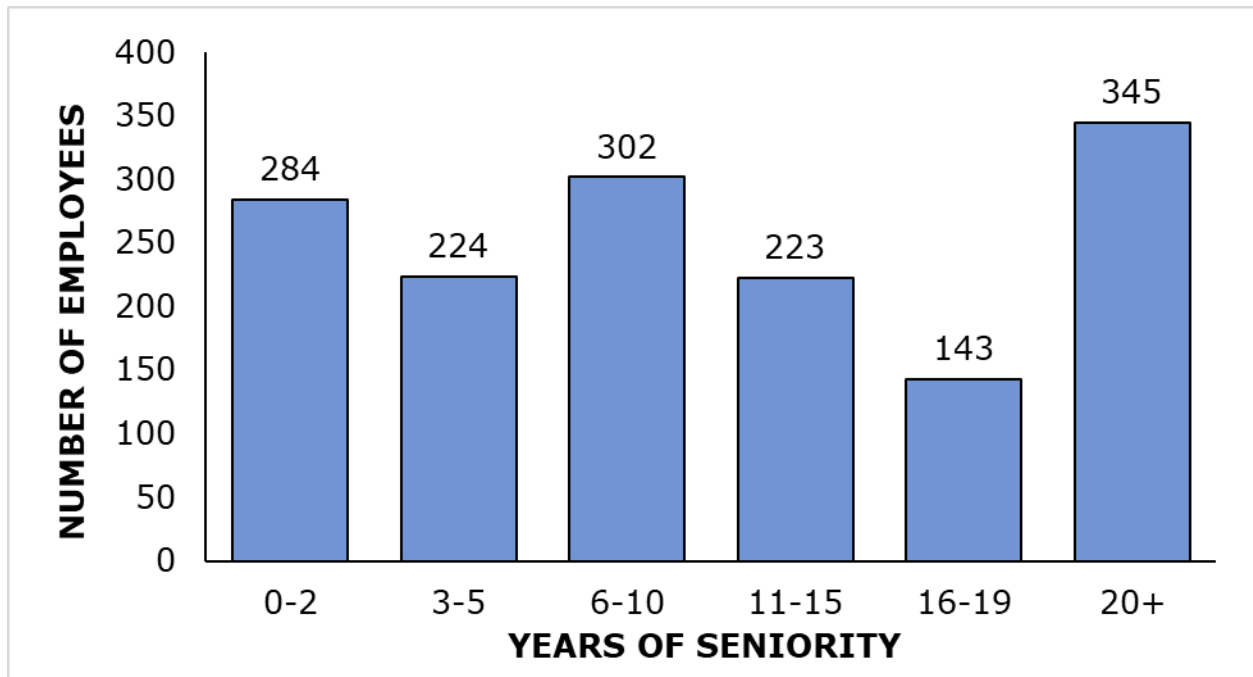
Source: TWC HR Data, VRD Employees, EOM August 2022

Compared to similar HR data presented in the 2020 CSNA (EOM August 2019), the distribution has shifted somewhat towards less seniority. The number of employees with over 15 years of experience decreased by 15% (from 577 to 488 employees), while the number of employees with two or less years of experience increased by 17% (from 243 to 284 employees). As a result, the median range for seniority decreased from 11-15 years in 2019 to 6-10 years in 2022. At the same time, staff turnover rates remain high, at about 17-18% annually for SFY'22 and SFY'23. This shift in seniority, together with staff turnover, highlights the need for strategies to provide ongoing training, mentorship, and professional development.

Figure 7 presents the average caseload size at the end of SFY'18 through SFY'24 (estimated), based on the number of open cases divided by the number of caseloads. The sharp increase from an average caseload size of 80 open cases in SFY'23 to an estimated 103 open cases in SFY'24 is reflective of a data conversion in the ReHabWorks case management system in November 2023 (SFY'24) of over 8,000 potentially eligible Pre-ETS customers who were previously not on a caseload to a specific caseload assignment.

Figure 7. Average Caseload Size, End of SFY Snapshots
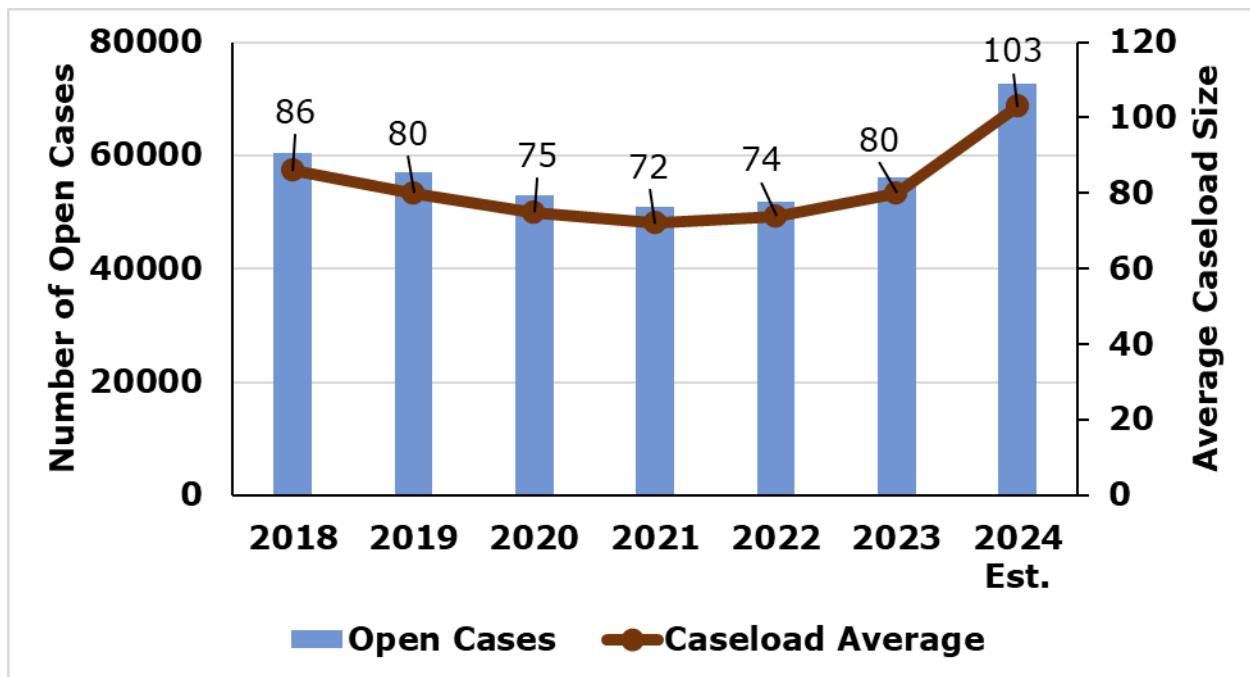
Source: ReHabWorks Case Management System, I|3 Estimates

Together with average caseload size, the number of vacancies for caseload carrying staff has also increased, from 54 vacancies at the end of the pandemic year of SFY'20 to 92 vacancies at the end of SFY'22. In SFY'23, the number decreased somewhat to 77 caseload carrying position vacancies. Nevertheless, the convergence of trends in declining seniority and higher average caseload sizes, together with high staff turnover and caseload vacancies, may further strain VRD resources in the years ahead given expectations for sustained customer growth.

In particular, the high growth of Texas' special education population has fueled an even higher increase in the numbers of student referrals. The number of referrals to the VR program for students with disabilities increased by over 50% from SFY'20 to SFY'23. Together with the recent assignment of most potentially eligible students to caseloads, the VR program will need additional staff resources for student caseloads. The need for transition counselors was echoed in the key informant interviews.

Workforce Diversity and Integration

Workplace diversity and integration are commonly associated with increased productivity, creative competition, and a reduced risk of employee and

customer discrimination.[18] Therefore, it is important for the VR Division to maintain a workforce that reflects the diverse demographics of its customers and understands the perspectives of Texans with disabilities. As of August 31, 2022, approximately 62% of VRD employees belonged to an ethnic or racial minority group, while around 81% of employees were women. Over one quarter (27%) of counselors who responded to the PPRI VR needs survey indicated that they had at least one disability.

VRD is working to increase co-enrollment in other workforce programs. In PY'22, about 10.3% of VR participants were also enrolled in programs such as SNAP, Choices, Adult, Dislocated-Worker, Youth, and Wagner-Peyser. Enrollment rates varied by local workforce development area (LWDA), ranging from 5.6% in East Texas to 22.5% in the Middle Rio Grande region. Additionally, VRD is analyzing childcare enrollment data to enhance support through childcare programs, addressing a major challenge highlighted in the VR Needs survey: the lack of affordable childcare for many VR customers.

In response to a need identified to serve more foster youth, in 2022 VRD launched the "Fostering Transition" statewide initiative. Its goal is to increase engagement and successful outcomes for youth in the foster care system. As of August 2023, an estimated 120 individuals have been referred to this initiative. VRD is partnering with two permanency court judges to unite other individuals and groups who advocate for the youth. These partnerships are helping VRD increase the number of students in foster care who receive VR services. Through subject matter expert assignments in the VR regions, a group of counselors are receiving continuous training on this foster care initiative.

Service Providers

VR customers receive services based on a determination of eligibility as well as a comprehensive assessment of reasonable and necessary services that is documented in an IPE. The VR program currently provides services in ten broad categories are as follows:

- **Academic and Occupational or Vocational Training**
  (examples: four-year college and certificate programs)
- **Assessment of Medical and Vocational Needs**
  (example: existing medical records assessment)

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[18] Kelli Green, Mayra López, Allen Wysocki, Karl Kepner, Derek Farnsworth, and Jennifer L. Clark (June 2002; revised October 2015). Diversity in the Workplace: Benefits, Challenges, and the Required Managerial Tools. https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/HR/HR02200.pdf

- **Assistive Technology and Equipment**
  (examples: computers, low-vision aids, and speech-to-text software)
- **Disability-Related Skills Training**
  (examples: self-advocacy, cane travel, and diabetes education)
- **Diagnosis and Treatment of Impairments**
  (examples: surgery, orthotics and prosthetics, and therapy)
- **Job Exploration and Work-Based Assistance and Learning**
  (examples: job placement, job coaches, and on-the-job training)
- **Supported Employment**
  (examples: supported employment plan and services, extended services for youth)
- **Personal Assistance**
  (examples: attendants, interpreters, and care providers)
- **Pre-ETS and Related Services**
  (examples: job exploration counseling, workplace readiness, self-advocacy, work-based learning, counseling on higher education)
- **Transportation and Room and Board**
  (examples: bus passes and room and board)

The provider network available to VR program staff can vary significantly depending on geography and disability type. For instance, VR program staff noted shortages of qualified psychologists in some smaller cities and rural areas, including those trained to evaluate individuals who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, or legally blind/visually impaired. VR program staff also often provide services such as assistive technology evaluation, installation and training, orientation and mobility, and in-home services for individuals who are blind. Transition counselors also provide Pre-ETS services for students. Providers for these services are also limited, especially in rural areas.

Figure 8 depicts the number of active service providers during FFY'17 to FFY'23.[19] The number of vendors declined annually, from almost 11,000 in FFY'17 to around 5,300 in FFY'23. However, the rate of decline during FFY'20 to FFY'23 was moderate (10.9%), while the number of service recipients per vendor increased by 42%, from 5.3 to 7.5 during this period. As a result of this higher customer throughput, the unique count of VR participants receiving purchased services from a vendor increased by 25%, from over 31,000 in FFY'20 to over 39,000 in FFY'23.

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[19] The number of active service providers is based on purchase order (PO) expenditures during a given fiscal year (not including cancellations or full refunds). A count of unique vendor physical location id is used in this report.

Figure 8. Number of Active Vendors and Service Recipients per Vendor, FFY17-FFY23
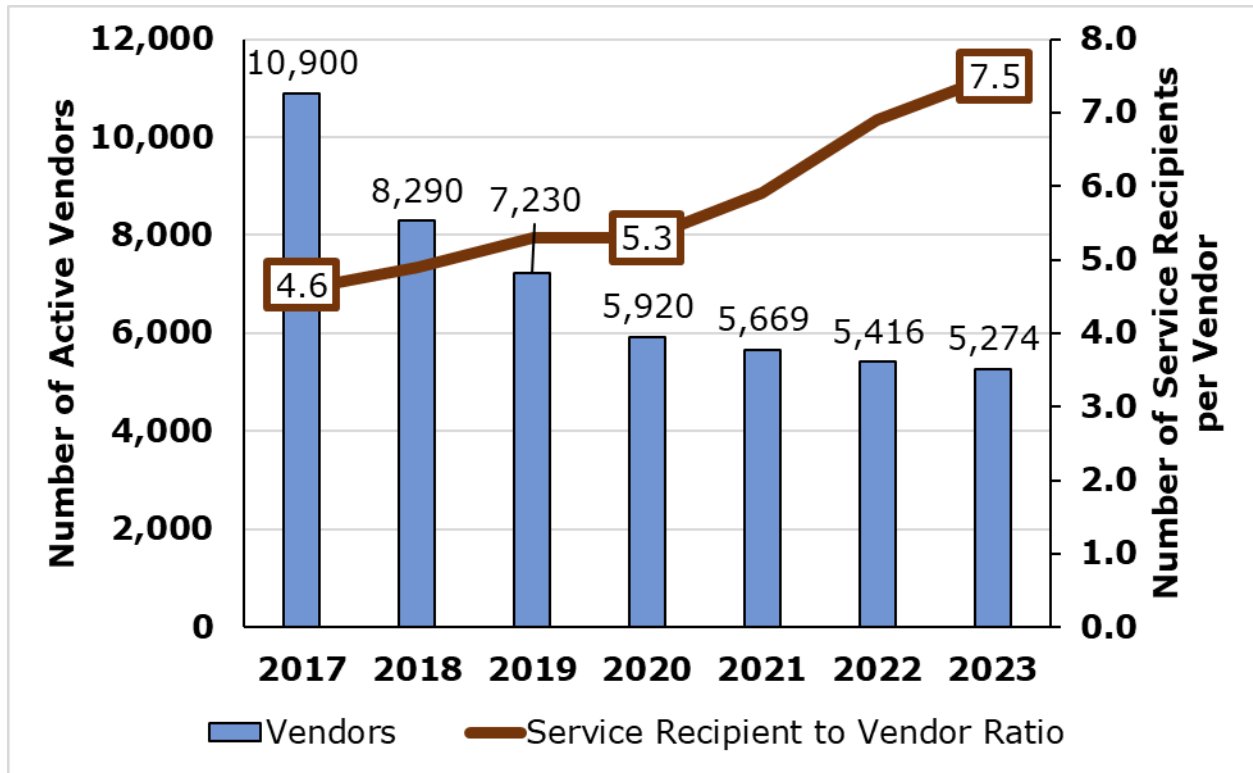
VRD has focused on recruiting and retaining contracted vendors. Examples of contracted services include job placement, post-secondary education and training, supported employment, pre-employment transition services, assistive technology, and hospital services, in addition to others. As shown in Table 9, in FFY'21, VRD successfully reversed the downward trend in the number of active contracted providers. Additionally, VRD increased the number of customers served through these providers. In FFY'23, contracted providers served 21,033 unique customers, representing an 11% increase from 18,947 customers in 2017. The particularly strong growth in purchased service recipients in FFY'22 (18.2% increase from FFY'21) coincided with across-the-board rate increases for contracted employment and pre-employment transition services.

Table 9. Contracted Vendors and Service Recipients per Vendor

FFY	Active Contracted Providers	Service Authorizations (SA)	Contracted Services (SA) Recipients	Recipient to Provider Ratio
2017	1,032	38,245	18,947	18.4
2018	775	32,910	17,154	22.1
2019	748	32,397	17,479	23.4
2020	633	27,546	15,095	23.9
2021	662	32,102	17,169	25.9
2022	722	37,673	20,295	28.1
2023	704	37,858	21,033	29.9

Source: ReHabWorks, Purchase Order Tables

In addition to the total number served, the service recipient to provider ratio has steadily increased. In FFY'17, contracted vendors served an average of 18 customers. By FFY'23, this number had increased to 29 customers served per vendor. As the demand for services continues to grow, sustainable growth will depend on ensuring access to contracted services for a larger number of individuals.

It is important to note that the service recipient to provider ratios for individuals with most significant disabilities have historically been lower and tend to exhibit less elasticity and growth. This is due to the greater complexity of services involved and the need for physical proximity. As shown in Table 10, from FFY'20 to FFY'23, the proportional increase in the number of customers served per provider was smaller for customers with most significant disabilities (10% increase) compared to the average for all VR purchased service recipients (25% increase). The increase in customers per provider is even less for individuals with ASD, IDD, TBI and legal blindness, who also have most significant disabilities.

Table 10. Contracted Services, Number of Purchased Service Recipient per Provider

Population (Primary Disability)	FFY 20 Recipient to Provider Ratio	FFY 23 Recipient to Provider Ratio	Percent Increase
All VR	23.9	29.9	25%
Most Significant Disability, including:	10.3	11.4	10%
ASD	7.9	9.3	18%
BVI	6.1	6.4	5%
IDD	4.7	5.0	6%
TBI	1.7	1.8	0.6%

Source: ReHabWorks, Purchase Order Tables

Although the number of contracted service recipients has continued to increase on a year-over-year basis, growth slowed in FFY'23. The increase in contracted service recipients was 3.6% in FFY'23 compared to 18.2% in FFY'22. Customer populations with lower provider ratios may be more impacted during slower growth periods. For instance, the number of customers with a primary disability of IDD who received contracted purchased services decreased by 2.5% in FFY'23 compared to a 21% increase in FFY'22. Likewise, the number of BVI contracted service recipients decreased by 4.4% in FFY'23 compared to a 20.8% increase in FFY'22.

Finally, geography is an important factor in maintaining equitable service delivery. The 2020 CSNA identified a need to increase provider availability in smaller urban and rural areas. Based on stakeholder feedback for the 2023 CSNA, there is still a need for improved access to service delivery in less populated areas of the state, including for pre-employment transition services.

VR Service Expenditures

Table 11 shows statewide service authorization (SA) payments in ReHabWorks according to CSNA VR service category. From FFY'21 to FFY'23, aggregated SA expenditures increased substantially, by 55%, from

$120,801,000 in FFY'21 to $187,406,000 in FFY'23. The spending categories with the largest increases reflect VRD's Customer First priorities discussed earlier in this report. From FFY'21 to FFY'23:

- SA expenditures for **academic and occupational or vocational training** increased by 93%, from 24.7 to 47.7 million;
- SA expenditures for **job exploration and work-based learning** (non Pre-ETS) increased by 62%, from 10 to 16.6 million; and
- SA expenditures for **pre-employment transition services**, which include work-based learning, increased by 130% from 18 to 41.4 million.

Table 11. Service Authorization Payments by Service Category, FFY21-FFY23

VR Service Category	2021	2022	2023
Academic and Occupational or Vocational Training	$24,716,000	$32,400,000	$47,687,000
Assessment of Medical and Vocational Needs	$12,490,000	$14,108,000	$13,371,000
Assistive Technology and Equipment	$26,587,000	$29,355,000	$32,031,000
Diagnosis and Treatment of Impairments	$20,177,000	$20,145,000	$22,483,000
Disability-Related Skills Training	$1,323,000	$1,478,000	$1,910,000
Job Exploration and Work-Based Learning	$10,266,000	$15,077,000	$16,584,000
Other	$526,000	$700,000	$1,028,000
Supported Employment Services	$4,872,000	$7,499,000	$7,091,000
Transportation, Room, and Board	$663,000	$1,522,000	$2,195,000
Personal Assistance and Interpreters	$1,152,000	$1,572,000	$1,623,000

VR Service Category	2021	2022	2023
Pre-ETS and Related Services	$18,029,000	$34,112,000	$41,403,000
Total:	**$120,801,000**	**$157,968,000**	**$187,406,000**

Source: ReHabWorks, Service Authorization Tables (rounded to nearest $1,000)

As shown in Table 12, the relative spending increase was even higher when focusing on youth (customers aged 14 – 24), with SA service expenditures nearly doubling from FFY'21 to FFY'23 (99.7% increase). The main drivers of the spending increase were academic and occupational or vocational training (97.9% increase) and pre-employment transition services (130% increase). The proportion of youth expenditures in total VR expenditures rose from 41% in FFY'21 to 53% in FFY'23.

Table 12. Service Authorization Payments for Students & Youth, FFY21-FFY23

VR Service Category	2021	2022	2023
Academic and Occupational or Vocational Training	$18,079,000	$23,869,000	$35,770,000
Assessment of Medical and Vocational Needs	$1,471,000	$1,822,000	$2,168,000
Assistive Technology and Equipment	$2,536,000	$3,003,000	$3,743,000
Diagnosis and Treatment of Impairments	$1,465,000	$1,290,000	$1,754,000
Disability-Related Skills Training	$659,000	$601,000	$854,000
Job Exploration and Work-Based Learning	$4,025,000	$7,729,000	$8,649,000
Other	$93,000	$110,000	$241,000
Supported Employment Services	$2,963,000	$4,229,000	$3,949,000
Transportation, Room, and Board	$286,000	$504,000	$661,000
Personal Assistance and Interpreters	$357,000	$550,000	$566,000

VR Service Category	2021	2022	2023
Pre-ETS and Related Services	$18,029,000	$34,112,000	$41,403,000
Total:	**$49,963,000**	**$77,819,000**	**$99,758,000**

Source: ReHabWorks, Service Authorization Tables (rounded to nearest $1,000)

It is important to note that average cost per participant has increased along with the overall volume of spending. The highest average costs for training services during FFY'21 to FFY'23 were for four-year college and university training ($7,320 as of FFY'23, a 37% increase from FFY'21) and Work-Based Learning Experiences, non Pre-ETS ($7,040 as of FFY'23, a 29.8% increase from FFY'21). Note that the average costs in Table 13 are calculated for purchased service recipients only (for instance, customers who receive academic training via comparable benefits such as tuition waivers are not included in the denominator).

Table 13. Average Cost for Training Services, FFY21-FFY23

VR Service Category	2021	2022	2023
Four-Year College or University	$5,340	$6,020	$7,320
Disability Related Skills Training	$980	$1,020	$1,140
Graduate College or University	$4,470	$4,510	$4,680
Job Readiness Training	$1,480	$2,090	$2,570
Junior or Community College	$1,630	$1,760	$1,970
Miscellaneous Training	$1,850	$2,010	$2,130
Occupational/Vocational Training	$2,250	$2,620	$3,080
On The Job Training	$360	$880	$860
Work Based Learning Experiences (non Pre-ETS)	$5,420	$6,160	$7,040

Pre-ETS Expenditures

As shown in Figure 9, the VR program has robustly expanded Pre-ETS spending through service authorizations, from a total of around $8,265,000 in FFY'17 to $41,400,000 in FFY'23. The main driver in this growth has been expenditures for work-based learning experiences, which rose from nearly 3 million dollars in FFY'17 to over 21 million dollars in FFY'23.

Figure 9. Annual FFY Client Service Pre-ETS Expenditures in RHW
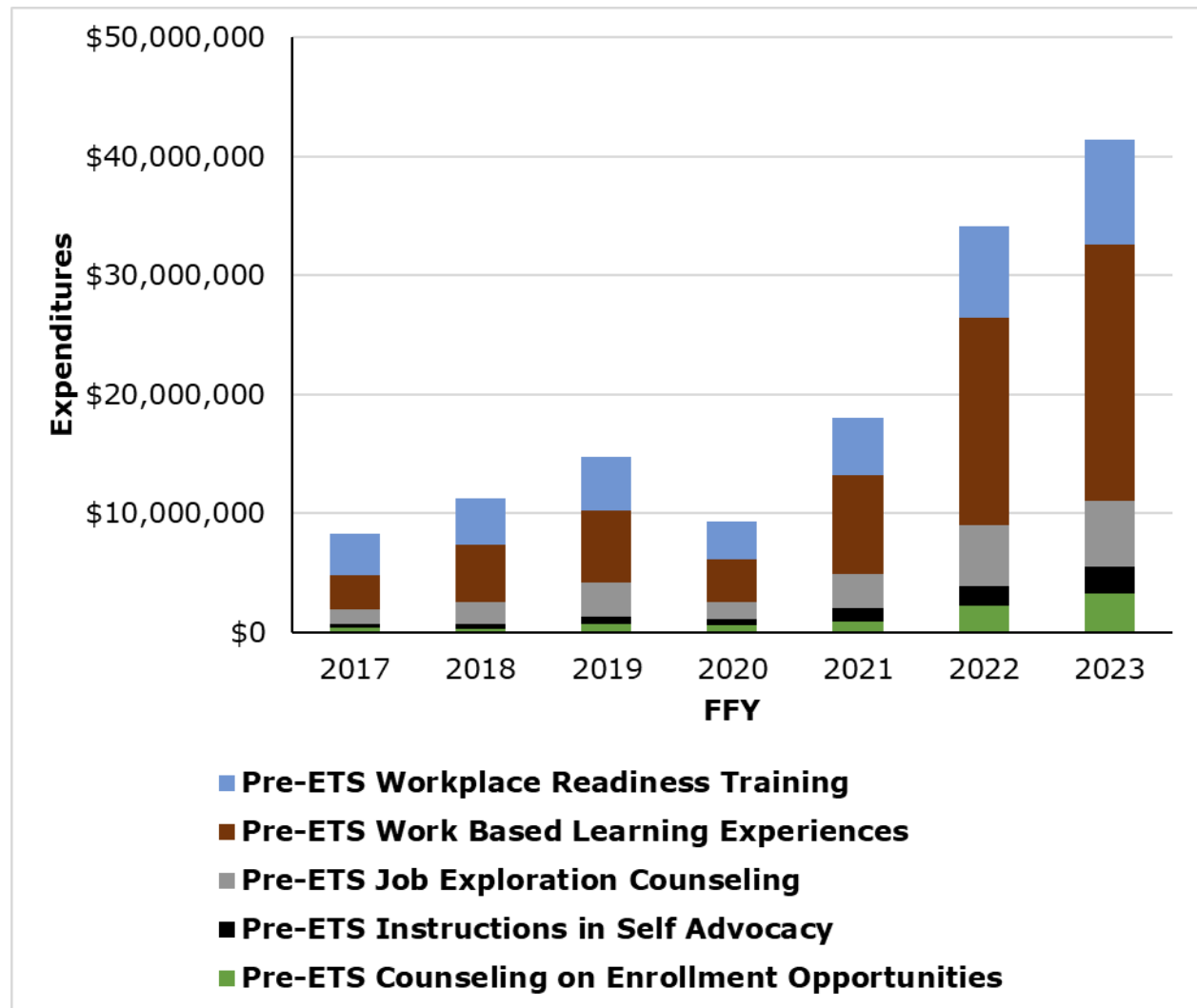
Source: ReHabWorks Service Authorization Tables

Pre-Employment Transition Service 15 Percent Reserve Set Aside

The methodology currently used to determine the 15 percent reserve set aside follows NTACT-C guidance, dated July 6, 2022. This guidance is available at: Pre-Employment Transition Services: Reserve Set-Aside Determination Guide (transitionta.org). The NTACT-C guidance lists the

following steps for projecting required and coordinated Pre-ETS expenditures:

Step 1 - Determine the total number of students with disabilities in the State which includes those students eligible for the VR program as well as those students with disabilities "potentially eligible" for the VR program.

Although not explicitly included in the NTACT-C guidance, TWC also uses historical data provided by TEA to determine the number of SWD in the preceding three fiscal years to calculate growth rates. Due to population growth and in-migration, the number of SWD in Texas has grown robustly in the range of 5-7 percent annually since FFY'20. These historical growth rates allow TWC to dynamically project future growth of SWD in Texas. According to data provided to TWC by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the number of transition aged students (14-21) receiving Special Education and 504 Plan services under IDEA in School Year (SY) 2023 to 2024 was over 389,350, compared to around 332,700 in SY 2021 to 2022 – an increase of 17% for the three-year period.

Step 2 Determine the number of students with disabilities in the State that need pre-employment transition services required activities, based on verifiable VR agency data. TWC estimates that it will provide required Pre-ETS services to around 16,600 students in FFY'25, an increase of 48% since FFY'21 (11,200).

Step 3 Calculate the cost for the provision of the required and pre-employment transition coordination activities.

Based on Steps 1 and 2 and using average cost for the most recently completed FFY, TWC estimates spending for the current and subsequent two fiscal years. Spending projections considered the high growth scenarios, which account for annual increases in the SWD population as well as growth in the proportion of the SWD population served. The projections are reviewed annually to ensure they reflect actual growth.

TWC's methodology provides for dynamic growth scenarios based on the expansion of Pre-ETS services resulting from the growth of the SWD population statewide. To ensure equitable service delivery, I|3 provides VRD with statewide heatmaps overlaying TEA student populations with Pre-ETS customers served (Appendix A). This has allowed VRD to increase outreach efforts to address the need for Pre-ETS in more sparsely populated and rural counties.

VR Program Performance

Several key predictors were associated with VR success from PY'20 to PY'22, including:

1. **Demographic factors** such as severity of disability, primary disability category and age at exit;
2. **Service provision** such as post-secondary education and training, work-based learning experiences, specialized (premium) employment services, and supported employment services; and
3. **Geographic factors** such as large metropolitan vs. smaller rural areas.

The VR **success rate** used in this report is calculated as follows:

- **Numerator:** number of participants exiting from the VR program with an outcome in competitive, integrated employment (CIE)
- **Denominator:** total number of participants exiting, including those with CIE outcomes and those without CIE outcomes

The overall VR success rate for all exiting participants during PY'20 to PY'22 was 49.2%.

Demographic Factors

As discussed earlier in the report, during PY'20 to PY'22, success rates for individuals varied significantly based on level of disability significance (please see Table 4). The success rate for individuals with most significant disabilities was less than half that of individuals without significant disabilities (36.9% versus 79.9% success rates, respectively), and around 12 percentage points lower than for individuals with significant disabilities (36.9% versus 49.5% success rates, respectively).

Age is also correlated with the VR success rate. As shown in Table 14, VR participants who are in the youth age category (14-24) have significantly lower success rates than for adults. This is to be expected since youth may have little or no work experience coming into the VR program. Services targeted at youth and students such as Pre-ETS, and academic or vocational and occupational training, are designed to bridge the gap in work experience and provide job readiness and marketable job skills.

Table 14. Success Rates by Age at Exit

Age at Closure	Successful Closures	All Closures	Success Rate
18 to 24	7,195	18,572	38.7%
25 to 34	5,279	10,607	49.8%
35 to 44	4,701	8,883	52.9%
45 to 54	5,721	10,824	52.9%
55 to 64	6,257	11,735	53.3%
65 or Older	3,324	5,439	62.0%
Totals:	**32,477**	**66,060**	**49.2%**

Source: ReHabWorks Tables (aggregate counts for PY'20 through PY'22)

As shown in Table 15, success rates also vary by primary disability category. Individuals with auditory and communication difficulties have historically had higher success rates, while individuals with psychosocial and psychological difficulties, and those with cognitive difficulties, have had comparably lower success rates.

Table 15. Success Rates by Primary Disability, PY18-PY22

Primary Disability	PY'18	PY'19	PY'20	PY'21	PY'22
Auditory & Communication	85.85%	83.34%	79.02%	78.85%	82.68%
Cognitive	49.81%	45.79%	38.15%	39.16%	40.71%
Physical	58.96%	51.13%	45.54%	45.40%	48.96%
Psychosocial & Psychological	50.46%	43.16%	35.18%	36.04%	37.44%
Legally Blind	53.97%	50.00%	44.84%	36.79%	47.27%
Other Visual	72.13%	67.13%	59.11%	55.23%	57.61%

It is important to note that both disability significance and age may be correlated with primary disability. For instance, during PY'20 to PY'22, the proportion of individuals with cognitive disabilities who were youth (aged 14-24) at exit was 68%, which is considerably higher than the overall VR average of 28% for the period. Likewise, primary disability categories with the highest proportions of individuals with most significant disabilities at exit during PY'20 to PY'22 include legally blind (62%), other visual difficulties (49%), cognitive (42%) and psychological and psychosocial difficulties (37%). Further analysis is needed to isolate the independent effect of primary disability while controlling for age and disability significance.

Service-Related Factors

Evaluation research by I|3 has shown that service provision can have a significant causal impact on VR success that is independent of age, disability significance and primary disability difficulty category (please see description of the evaluation of the Project SEARCH internship program for students with disabilities in the summary section of this report). Additional research is presented further in this section. Note that apart from the Project SEARCH participant employment rates (Table 17), the tables here reflect correlations and service impact has not yet been subject to evaluations to determine causality.

Table 16. Success Rates, Work Based Learning, PY19-PY22 Exiters

Number of Weeks	Pre-ETS	Basic	All
1-12 Weeks	44%	53%	44%
13-24 Weeks	53%	64%	58%
25-36 Weeks	56%	70%	63%
37+ Weeks	60%	67%	60%

Source: ReHabWorks Tables (aggregate counts for PY'19 to PY'22)

During PY'19 to PY'22, the success rate for individuals in paid work experiences (PWE) varied based on the number of weeks and type of PWE (Basic or Pre-ETS). As shown in Table 16, the success rate for individuals in Basic PWE peaks at 25-36 weeks (70%) and remains stable for individuals in Pre-ETS PWE beyond 37 weeks (60%). This suggests a potential plateau in success rates beyond the 25-36 week mark for Basic PWE, indicating the

need for further analysis to understand the factors influencing success. For Pre-ETS, success rates are 5% to 20% higher depending on the number of weeks in PWE. As shown earlier in Table 14, the VR success rate for youth is significantly lower at about 38%, likely due to limited work experience. Paid work experiences targeted at youth and students could help bridge this gap by offering valuable job readiness training and marketable skills.

Table 17. Project SEARCH Exiters Employment Rates

Program Year	Project SEARCH Participants	Comparison Group	All VR
2020	65.7%	41.7%	47.6%
2021	50.7%	46.1%	47.2%
2022	69.2%	44.6%	50.9%

Source: ReHabWorks Tables (employment rates for PY'20 to PY'22)

Other service outcomes that have been found to be associated with significantly higher success rates include attainment of a post-secondary credential attainment during VR program participation (68% success rate) and completion of supported employment services (67.6% success rate). Research conducted by I|3 prior to this CSNA report period also showed a significantly higher success rate for customers with ASD who received services from premium employment service providers certified with an Autism endorsement from the University of North Texas WISE, compared to those who used non-premium services.

Geographic Factors

As shown in Table 18, geography also plays a role in VR success for individuals, but primarily for individuals with most significant disabilities. While among all VR exiters from PY'20 to PY'22, those who resided in smaller rural areas (counties with populations under 100,000) have slightly higher success rates (49.4%) than in the largest metro areas.[20] For individuals with most significant disabilities, however, those in smaller and rural counties had lower success rates compared to medium or larger metro areas (35.5% compared to 39.2% and 40.5%, respectively). This difference becomes even

[20] Major metropolitan areas include Greater Houston, Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex, Greater San Antonio and Greater Austin, as defined by the US Census Bureau. Medium sized counties are those outside of these four metro areas with populations over 100,000. Smaller/rural areas are counties with populations under 100,000.

more pronounced for individuals in smaller and rural counties with most significant disabilities and Autism (around 10 percentage points lower than large metro areas), IDD (around 14 percentage points lower), legal blindness (5 percentage points lower) and TBI (11 percentage points lower).

Table 18. Employment Rates by Area of Residence

Primary Disability	Large Metro Areas	Medium Sized Urban Areas	Smaller/Rural Counties
All VR Exiters, including	48.3% (38,781)	53.2% (9,047)	49.4% (18,384)
Most Significant Disabilities, including:	39.2% (12,719)	40.5% (2,437)	35.5% (4,527)
Autism	48.5% (2,317)	45.3% (316)	38.7% (491)
IDD	43.3% (1,469)	40.6% (249)	29.2% (397)
Legally Blind	34.3% (1,089)	27.3% (289)	29.1% (420)
TBI	40.9% (133)	45.0% (22)	29.1% (56)

Source: ReHabWorks Tables (aggregate counts for PY'20 to PY'22)

As noted earlier in this report, town hall attendees and key informants commented on the limited availability of specialty employment service and pre-ETS providers in less populated counties and rural areas. Recent nationwide studies have shown that areas with lesser degrees of urbanization not only have higher percentages of people reporting disabilities, but also pose greater challenges for providing equitable healthcare, vocational rehabilitation, and educational service delivery.[21] Employer awareness of the work-related needs of people with most significant disabilities can also vary from urban to rural areas. The question of why the level of urbanization appears to have a varying impact on Texans with disabilities merits further research.

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[21] Prevalence of Disability and Disability Types by Urban–Rural County Classification—U.S., 2016, American Journal of Preventive Medicine, Volume 57, Issue 6, pages 749-756, December 1, 2019, https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(19)30332-0/fulltext, accessed on November 9, 2020.

Quality Employment Outcomes

The overarching goal of VRD's Customer First strategy is to produce quality employment outcomes for people with disabilities. VRD and I|3 have collaborated on developing a quality employment index for successful case closures, which includes the following three measures:

- No decrease in earnings from IPE to exit
- Health Insurance (public or private) at time of exit
- Earnings at exit over the annual Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) rate, which is the cut-off wage for receiving social security benefits (SSI/SSDI)

Table 19. Quality Employment Measures for PY19–PY21

Quality Employment Measure	PY 2019	PY 2020	PY 2021	PY 2022
No Wage Decrease	89.8%	88.0%	88.7%	85.5%
Insurance at Exit	74.4%	73.3%	72.4%	75.7%
Wages at exit over SGA	62.1%	64.5%	65.3%	64.9%
Meets all 3 measures	**44.1%**	**45.9%**	**45.2%**	**46.1%**

As shown in Table 19, the percentage of successful exiters meeting all three measures (i.e., the quality employment rate) rose slightly from 44.1% in PY'19 to 46.1% in PY'22. Notably, the quality employment rate in PY'22 was higher for adults at exit (rate of 48.2 % for exiters aged 25 and over) than for youth (rate of 36.6% for exiters aged 14 to 24).

As discussed earlier in this report, Customer First strategies to increase quality employment outcomes include providing services leading to significant wage gains such as post-secondary education and training, and work-based learning experiences. Concurrently, a focus on labor market information tools would assist participants, providers, and staff in identifying high growth occupations offering competitive living wages. For instance, job titles for adult VR participants with monthly wages over SGA at exit include registered nurses (98% of adult VR exiters during PY'20 to PY'22 with this job title earning over SGA), heavy and tractor truck drivers (96%), general and operations managers, in addition to other managers (92% and 90%,

respectively) and teachers and instructors (84%) and nursing assistants (82%). Job titles for youth VR participants earning over SGA at exit included automotive service technicians and mechanics (91% of youth VR exiters during PY'20 to PY'22 with this job title earning over SGA), barbers (85%), production workers (79%) and teaching assistants (65%).

Stakeholder Information Sources

Town Hall Meetings

In April and May 2023, TWC held five virtual and in-person town hall meetings. A total of 255 people registered, and 92 attended.[22] The town halls targeted three main groups: VR service providers, TWC staff members, and customers and caregivers. According to the registration data, these three groups made up over two-thirds (68%) of the attendees, with an estimated 35% being VR providers (Figure 10). To gather more feedback, TWC also created an accessible town hall online survey using the SurveyMonkey platform. Eleven people took the survey, answering a total of 109 individual questions. These questions were identical to those asked during the town halls.

Figure 10. Affiliation of Town Hall Attendees

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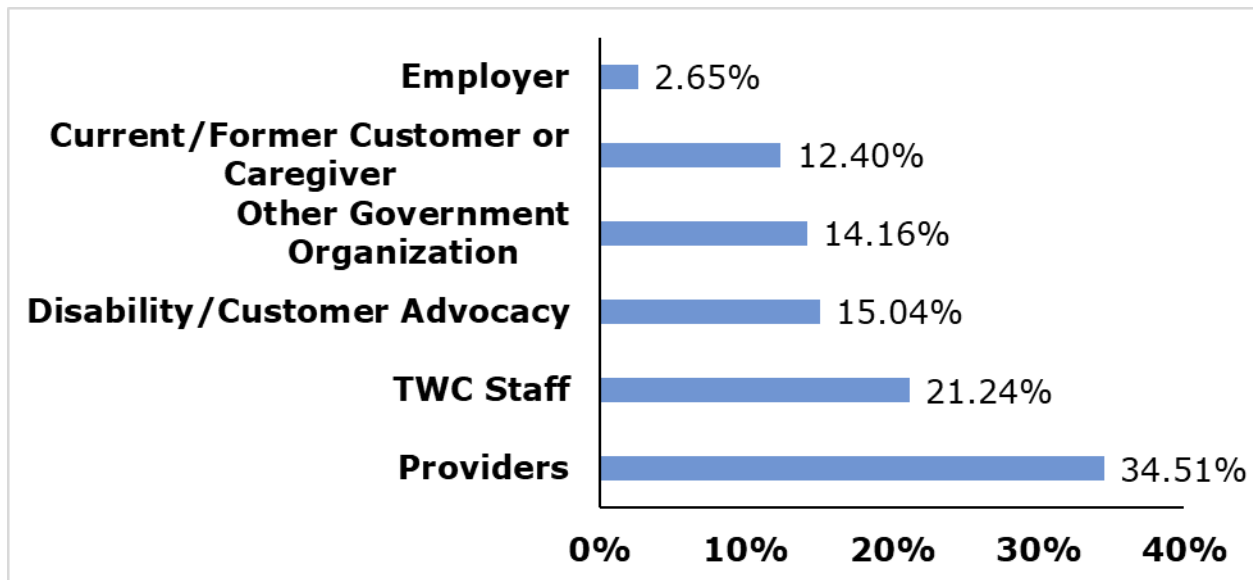
[22] The Zoom webinar platform distinguishes between "participants" and "attendees." Participants include the webinar host, co-hosts, and designated panelists. The attendance numbers in this report do not include the RCT facilitators, State Office staff and regional VRD representatives designated to respond live to inquiries.

Content Analysis: Town Halls and Online Survey

The sources for content analysis consisted of closed-captioning transcripts from each of the five town hall meetings and responses from the SurveyMonkey survey. Table 20 lists the categories of needs based on the number of unique mentions in both the town halls and the online survey.[23]

Table 20. VR Needs Mentioned, Town Hall Meetings and Survey

VR Program or Service Need	2023 Ranking (Mentions)
Staffing and Workloads	36
Customer Choice and Provider Availability/Training	35
Labor Market Knowledgeability/Business Partnerships	20
Communication/Collaboration	19
Job Placement, Readiness, and Workplace Learning	18
Community Outreach and Marketing	11
Benefits and Work Incentives	10
Disability Skills/Assistive Technology	10
Disability Training and Awareness	10
Medical/Vocational Assessment	8
Transportation/Housing	7
Diagnosis/Treatment of Impairments	7
Academic/Vocational Training	4
Supported Employment	1

Source: 2023 Town Hall Meeting Textual Analysis

Discussion of Needs Mentioned

Workload and Staffing Needs

Town hall attendees[24] identified the need to reduce VR counselor workloads by hiring additional staff. They noted that this would help retain experienced staff, improve service continuity, and enhance response times. Attendees

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[23] Unique mention: keywords were counted only once for each discrete response.
[24] For ease of presentation, in this section the term "attendees" will include online survey (SurveyMonkey) respondents in addition to the attendees at the six town halls.

also emphasized the need for comprehensive training for new staff on referral processes, documentation, and community resources to address knowledge gaps.

Providers stressed the importance of better hand-offs during staff turnover to prevent service delays, suggesting a standardized transfer process to improve client satisfaction. Several customers reported inconsistent experiences with multiple counselors and called for standardized guidance to ensure consistent service provision and knowledge sharing.

Customer Choice and Provider Availability/Training

Attendees underscored the need for more diverse provider options and improvements in provider rates, reimbursement, and payment processes. Customers frequently cited limited provider availability, especially in rural areas, necessitating travel to other cities for services. Providers reported outdated reimbursement rates and delayed payments, causing financial strain and loss of providers.

Both customers and providers mentioned the challenge of finding qualified providers who can offer high-quality services. Customers noted the need for more qualified job placement providers. Providers suggested enhanced training programs, including regular sessions on paperwork processes, working with disabilities, and strategies to improve customer outcomes.

Labor Market Knowledgeability and Business Partnerships

Attendees frequently emphasized the need for increased outreach and collaboration with potential employers. Feedback indicated that VR staff should have more opportunities to meet employers face-to-face and build strong relationships. Suggestions included hosting events with employers, familiarizing VR staff with local job markets, planning job fairs for youth and students, and collaborating with employers to develop job prospects.

Many attendees highlighted the importance of VR staff understanding local job markets. Customers and providers observed that some VR counselors may lack business knowledge and rely on providers for local job availability. They also noted a need for more diverse and high-quality job leads.

Communication and Collaboration Needs

Town hall attendees called for a comprehensive list of points of contact within the VR program to streamline inquiries and ensure consistent communication. Providers emphasized the need for increased consistency in service delivery and paperwork across the state. Customers highlighted the

need to improve the accuracy of information about VR services and policies. Additionally, attendees mentioned the need to enhance the transition process for youth identified as potentially eligible for Pre-ETS to general VR services.

Job Placement, Readiness, and Workplace Learning Needs

Customers expected more on-the-job training programs. Suggestions included having VR counselors and providers collaborate with employers to identify roles for potential employees and train customers accordingly. Several attendees also emphasized the need for ongoing support and skills training for customers after securing employment, including follow-up services to help them achieve full independence in daily activities and maintain their jobs. Specific attention was given to a greater variety of job placement options, including opportunities for VR customers to explore simulated work environments and career paths tailored to their needs and abilities.

Community Outreach and Marketing

Town hall attendees frequently voiced the need to increase the visibility of the VR program. This includes educating the public, particularly veterans, people with brain injuries, and individuals with significant support needs due to intellectual developmental disabilities (IDD), about available VR services. Suggestions included hosting seminars with disability experts, conducting community outreach to adults with disabilities, and improving communication and follow-up with families.

Benefits and Work Incentives

The need for greater knowledge of social service benefits among VR counselors and staff was mentioned by town hall attendees. Attendees noted that some VR staff lacked understanding of benefits such as Medicaid waiver programs and other state programs, leading to reliance on providers for referrals. Many attendees also highlighted the need to educate customers, especially transition-age youth and their families, on how employment can coexist with receiving benefits and how they can work while maintaining eligibility for medical and other public benefits.

Disability Skills and Assistive Technology

Attendees frequently emphasized the need to streamline the process of acquiring assistive technology to reduce delays. Many noted that delays in obtaining necessary devices can cause significant problems, particularly

during the initial training period of a job, potentially resulting in job loss. Suggestions included simplifying the purchasing process, ensuring timely procurement of devices, and addressing bureaucratic hurdles. Additionally, the necessity for more assistive technology resources and providers, including alternative communication devices, was mentioned.

Disability Training and Awareness

Attendees identified the need to increase disability awareness, particularly among employers. They noted that while VR staff provide tools and resources, many employers remain unaware of available funding and benefits for hiring people with disabilities. Attendees also highlighted gaps in information sharing between potential employers and counselors regarding these benefits. Additionally, customers mentioned that VR staff and career specialists need more expertise on various disabilities, including effective communication with individuals with sensory, audio processing, and psychological disabilities. Frequent suggestions included training to ensure staff and providers can support customers with specific needs.

Medical and Vocational Assessment

Attendees often cited the need for better collaboration between VR counselors, customers, and providers to gather detailed medical and vocational information. There were recommendations for further medical testing, especially for neuro-cognitive disorders and neurodevelopmental disabilities. Attendees also suggested thorough vocational evaluations to understand the needs of transition-age youth as they age out of school programs and to provide targeted services to support their vocational goals.

Discussion of Progress Mentioned

Feedback from town halls and online surveys reflected not only perceived needs, but also perceived areas of progress. Customers and caregivers expressed satisfaction with VR services, noting the provision of necessary tools for job proficiency, professional and diligent VR counselors, and positive experiences with VR staff and providers.

Attendees praised the effectiveness of work experience programs in providing valuable opportunities for customers to demonstrate skills and for employers to observe and train potential employees. They also highlighted the positive impact of assistive and adaptive technology on careers and quality of life. Positive outcomes from ASD supports through college to full-time employment was also commended by attendees.

Significant progress in statewide Pre-ETS initiatives was frequently recognized. Customers mentioned VRCs have considerable information about college and technical school resources. They also stated that Pre-ETS services have helped them build confidence and skills through work-based learning and paid work experiences.

Key Informant Interviews

Sixteen key informant interviews were conducted in April and May 2023, involving VR managers and counselors from each integrated service area, including the CCRC and three state office personnel. The interviews highlighted several key needs categories identified in the 2023 CSNA:

- Customer Choice and Provider Availability/Training (16 interviews)
- Labor Market Knowledgeability/Business Partnerships (16 interviews)
- Communication/Collaboration (13 interviews)
- Staffing and Workload (12 interviews)
- Job Placement, Readiness, and Workplace Learning (12 interviews)

Breakdown of Key Categories

Customer Choice and Provider Availability/Training

- **Increase Provider Options**: Recruiting more providers, especially in rural areas, and diversifying the range of providers by offering higher incentives or premiums to specialized providers.
- **Ongoing Support and Training for Providers:** Increasing standardized training and support to help providers better understand and effectively serve customers with disabilities.
- **Improve Contract Set-Up, Documentation Processes and Available Provider Information:** Expediting the contract process, streamlining billing processes, and providing comprehensive information about available providers, including performance and specialization details.
- **Establishment Authority:** Investing in building provider capacity through more extensive skill-building programs and making capital improvements to VR agency facilities to effectively serve customers, improve infrastructure safety and accessibility, and integrate with workforce centers.

Labor Market Knowledgeability and Business Partnerships

- **Increase Collaboration with Workforce Solutions Offices:** Partnering with local boards to access current labor market information

and stay informed about local job markets through job fairs, workshops, and other hiring events.

- **Provide Ongoing Training for Counselors:** Offering training and resources to help counselors build labor market knowledge and effectively engage with employers.
- **Strengthen Relationships with Employers**: Focusing on consistent and ongoing employer engagement efforts and increasing the number of business relations specialists to meet the demand across regions.

Communication and Collaboration

- **Improve Collaboration with Schools:** Strengthening partnerships with educational institutions to better support students with disabilities, including those with 504 plans, mental health needs, and foster youth, by enhancing communication and referral processes.
- **Streamline Service Authorization and Purchasing Approvals**: Reducing bureaucratic hurdles, utilizing new technologies to innovate service delivery, and decreasing the number of approvals required.

Staffing and Workload

- **Reduce Workload and Build Staff Capacity:** Increasing staffing levels to reduce caseloads and workloads, and providing more standardized tools and technology from the state office to build staff capacity. In particular, a need for more transition counselors given the high growth in students with disabilities served by the VR program.
- **Increase Staff Compensation:** Ensuring competitive salaries and implementing equity adjustments and salary increases to retain qualified staff.
- **Reduce Turnover Rate:** Providing career support and professional development opportunities for staff, including unit support coordinators and purchasing specialists, to offer clear paths for advancement and keep experienced staff.

Job Placement, Readiness, and Workplace Learning

- **Expand Job Placement Opportunities, Work Experiences, and Apprenticeships:** Developing partnerships with local businesses to create more paid work experiences that provide hands-on learning and skill development opportunities, especially for youth and individuals in rural areas.
- **Provide More Ongoing Supports After Job Placement:** Ensuring continuous support after job placement by providing ongoing job coaching, skill development, and regular check-ins to address issues and help customers retain employment.

Areas of Progress

Key informants noted several perceived areas of progress. They highlighted the improved relationships with local workforce centers and praised Business Relations Coordinators for doing an excellent job in marketing VR programs to employers and establishing valuable partnerships, leading to successful job placements. Additionally, the development of specialized training programs and mentorship opportunities, such as the Subject Matter Utilization Resource Facilitators (SMURFs), was also seen as a positive step in equipping VR counselors with the knowledge and support needed to effectively guide customers through the complexities of benefits and work incentives.

VR Needs Survey

The 2023 Texas Workforce Solutions (TWS) Vocational Rehabilitation Web Survey (VR Needs Survey) was conducted to gather feedback from stakeholders, including VR participants, service providers, and staff.[25] The survey aimed to assess the importance, quality, and timeliness of VR services, identify challenges to successful rehabilitation, gauge satisfaction with service delivery, and measure knowledge about VR services. Key findings for these various aspects of VR services are summarized below. The full report on the VR Needs Survey is available separately.

Analysis and Findings

The VR Needs Survey results[26] indicated that all types of VR services were perceived as playing a significant role in successful rehabilitation and were delivered in a manner consistent with expectations regarding timeliness and quality. However, important differences emerged across groups of respondents (staff, participants, and providers) in terms of how they evaluated services and service delivery, challenges to rehabilitation, and knowledge of employment and disability.

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[25] The Public Policy Research Institute (PPRI) at Texas A&M University conducted the web-based survey. This survey replicated and expanded upon earlier surveys conducted in 2017 and 2020. Selection strategies were consistent with the 2020 survey, targeting 4,000 VR participants, 4,000 providers, and 400 staff.

[26] Overall, 1,074 respondents participated, including 585 participants, 334 providers, and 155 staff members. Of these, 72.0% fully completed the survey, including 424 participants, 221 providers, and 128 staff members.

Role of Service in Vocational Rehabilitation Success

Most respondents indicated that every type of vocational rehabilitation service played a large role in successful rehabilitation. This finding is consistent with the 2020 survey. As shown in Figure 11, across most items, nearly two-thirds of respondents said the service played a large role. The two exceptions were work incentive programs (49 percent) and transportation and room and board (54.1 percent). Respondents identified assistive technology and equipment (70.3 percent), academic and occupational or vocational training (69.9 percent), and job exploration and work-based assistance and learning services (69.5 percent) to be most important to their success.

Figure 11. Role of Services in Vocational Rehabilitation Success
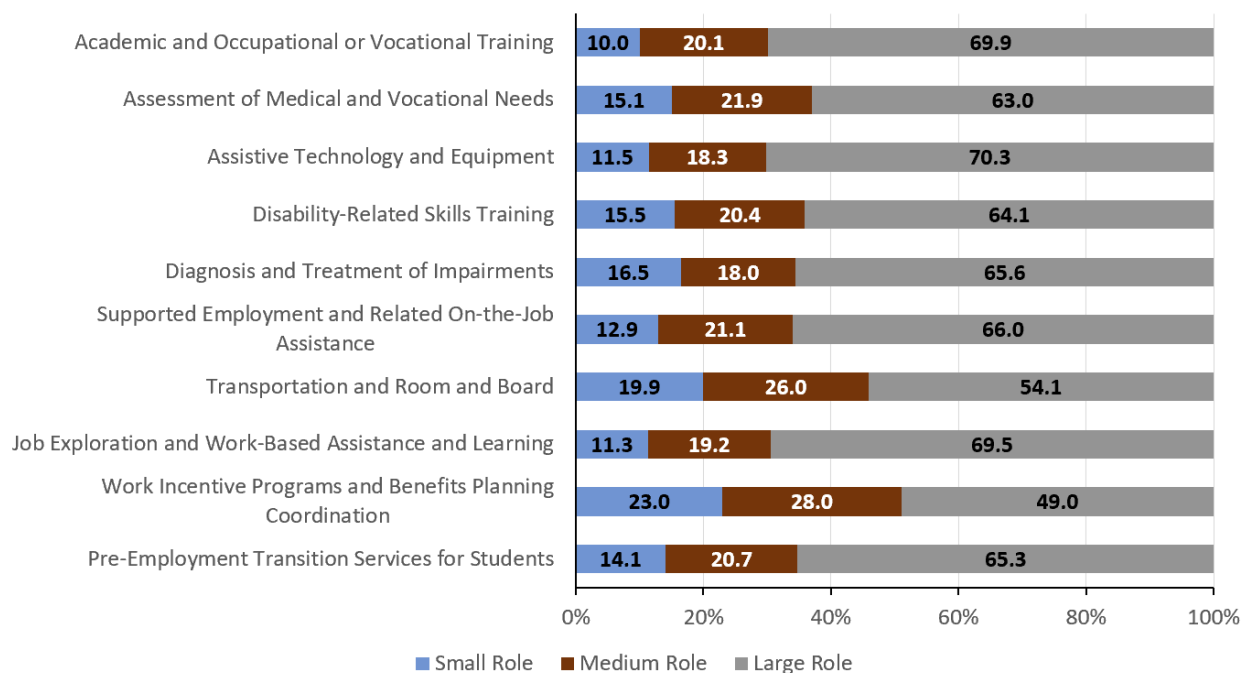
Source: 2023 PPRI VR Needs Survey Report

Displayed in Figure 12, results from the survey indicate that participants generally believed that VR services played a smaller role in successful rehabilitation compared to staff and providers. Consistent with 2020, the most significant difference between staff and participants was in the area of assessment of medical and vocational needs, with staff being more likely to believe that these services played a large role in successful rehabilitation. Participants identified assistive technology and equipment (67 percent), supported employment and related on-the-job assistance (62 percent), and

job exploration and work-based assistance and learning services (62 percent) to be most important to their success.

Figure 12. Percent Reporting Services Played a Large Role in Vocational Rehabilitation Success by Group
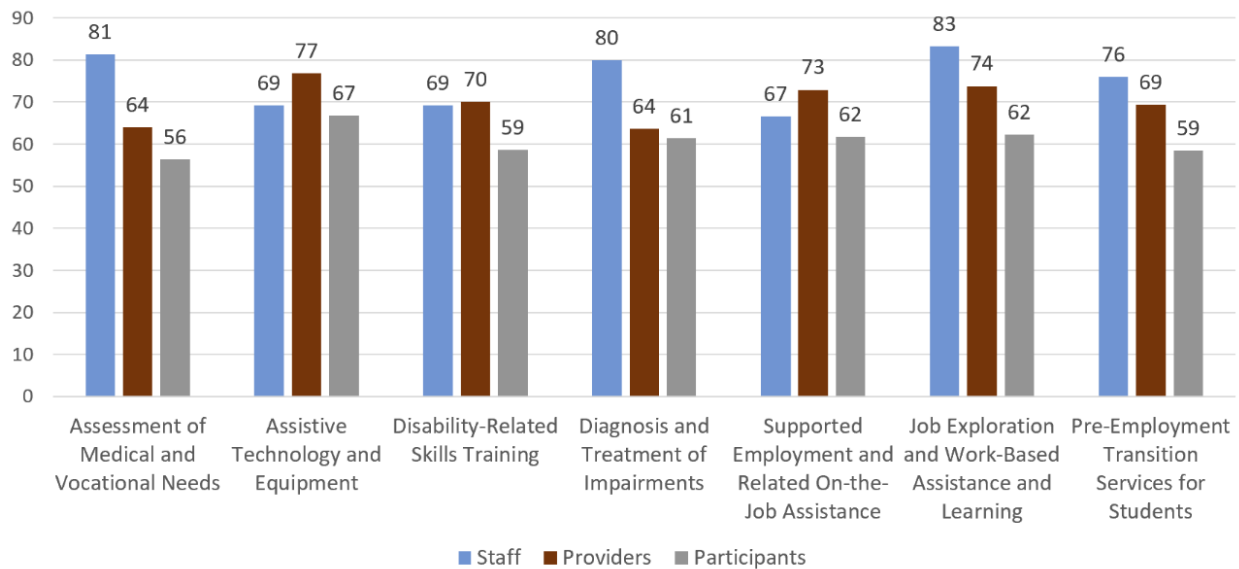
Source: 2023 PPRI VR Needs Survey Report

Quality and Timeliness of Services

A similar pattern emerged for ratings of the quality and timeliness of services. First, most respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the services were meeting needs with respect to quality and timeliness. Even the lowest ranked service—work incentive programs—were evaluated by most respondents (50.7 percent) as meeting needs with respect to quality and timeliness. Respondents were most positive about assistive technology and equipment (66.4 percent) and academic and occupational or vocational training (64.1 percent). Overall, the ratings are slightly lower and the rankings slightly different than in 2020 but the overall picture is fairly similar. We should note that the survey included questions about pre-employment transition services for students that were not part of the 2020 report.

Looking across groups, staff were consistently more positive than providers or participants. The differences on pre-employment transition services for students (23-points), academic and occupational or vocational training (18-points), and assessment of medical and vocational needs (18-points), were particularly large. Although staff were the most positive in their evaluations of the quality and timeliness of services, there was no significant difference

between the average responses of participants and providers. In the 2020 survey, participants rated these aspects lower than either providers or staff. As shown in Figure 13, participants were most positive about Assessment of Medical and Vocational Needs (66%), Academic and Occupational or Vocational Training (62%), and Disability-Related Skills Training (59%).

Figure 13. Percent Agree or Strongly Agree Services Meet Needs of Quality and Timeliness by Group
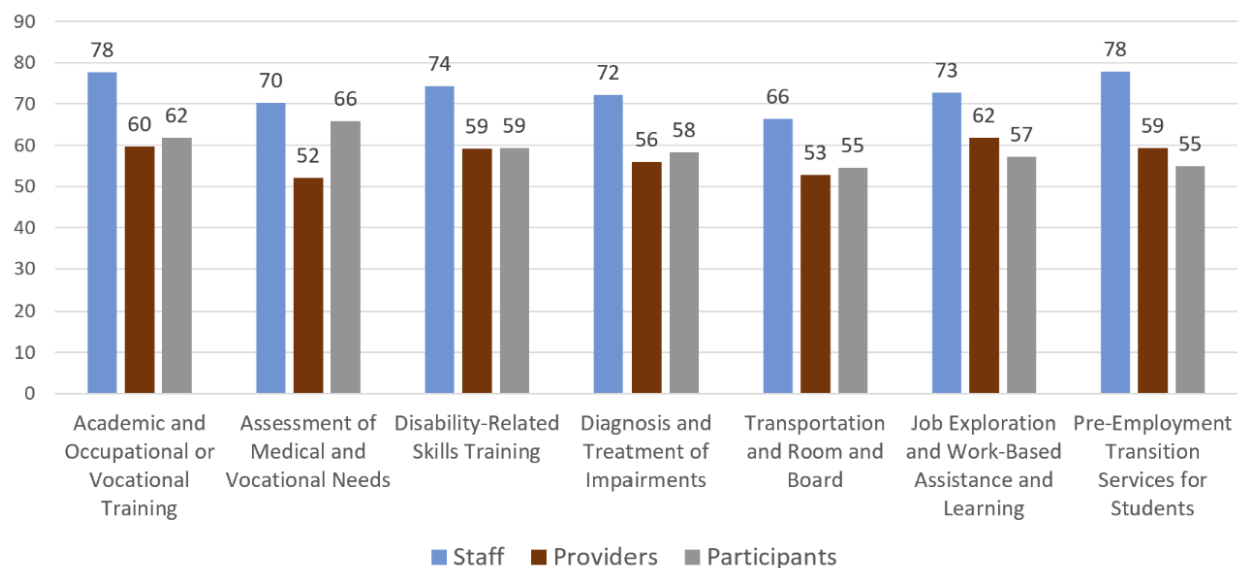
Source: 2023 PPRI VR Needs Survey Report

Satisfaction with Delivery of Services

Respondents also indicated satisfaction with the delivery of services. For most categories, approximately two out of three respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied with VR services. Consistent with 2020, the highest-rated service was courtesy and respectfulness of VR counselors and staff, with over three-quarters of respondents (76.1 percent) indicating they were satisfied or very satisfied.

Demonstrated in Figure 14, providers exhibited the lowest satisfaction ratings when assessing service delivery in general. The 2020 survey indicated no significant disparity in satisfaction levels among the three groups. Staff generally expressed the greatest satisfaction with VR services. Satisfaction with availability and quality of VR service providers was the only item to fall below 50%. In 2023, questions about the quality of VR service providers were revised to encompass provider availability. For the remaining items, nearly 80% of staff indicated satisfaction or very satisfied.

Figure 14. Percent Satisfied or Very Satisfied with Delivery of Services by Group
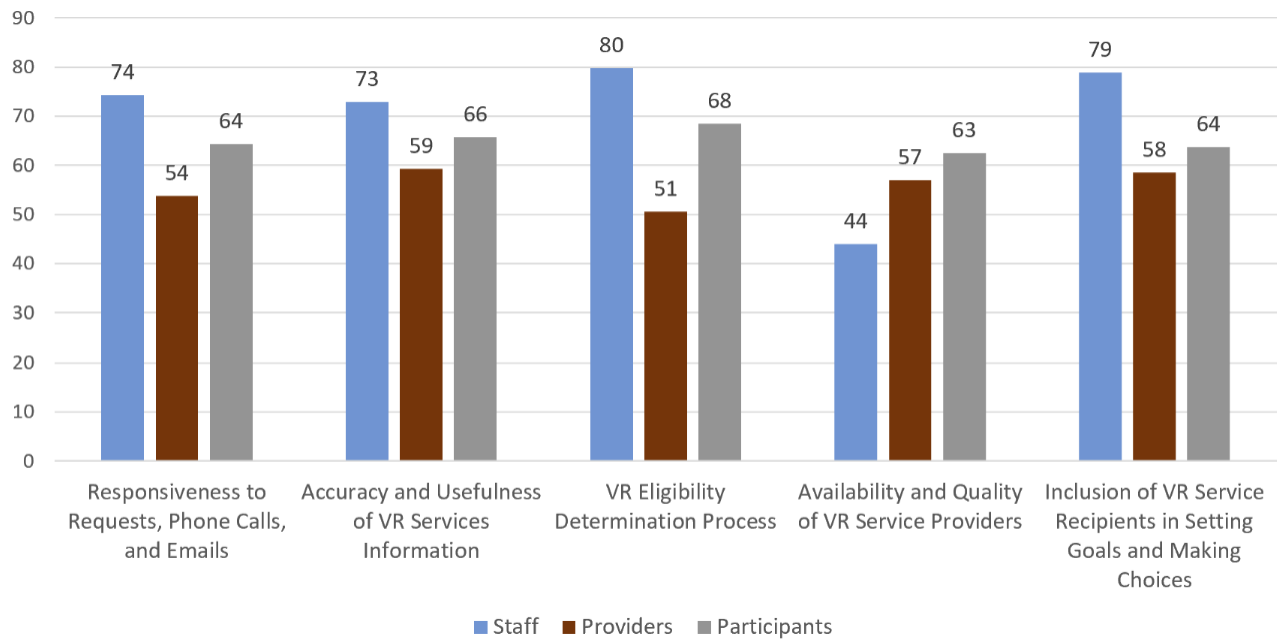
Source: 2023 PPRI VR Needs Survey Report

Challenges to Successful Vocational Rehabilitation

In addition to evaluating services, the survey also examined challenges to successful rehabilitation and knowledge about employment and disability. Questions about COVID and pandemic-related impacts were included as new sections which were not part of the 2020 report. As illustrated in Figure 15, the majority of respondents identified lack of affordable childcare, housing, and transportation, concern over loss of government benefits, lack of easily accessible information about benefits and incentives, and employer perceptions of people with disabilities as their greatest challenges. Status as a documented foreign worker or immigrant, and cultural, racial, or sexual discrimination were rarely seen as a challenge to success.

Figure 15. Different Challenges to Vocational Rehabilitation Success

Challenge	Sometimes	Often	Other
Concern Over Loss of Government Benefits	33.6	47.0	19.4
Cultural, Racial, or Sexual Discrimination	25.8	19.3	54.9
Lack of Affordable Child Care, Housing, or Transportation	27.8	54.2	18.0
Lack of Community and Family Support	37.4	40.8	21.8
Lack of Easily Accessible Information About Benefits and…	35.5	43.3	21.2
Lack of Reliable Personal Attendant Care	34.3	30.3	35.4
Employer Perceptions of People with Disabilities	37.1	41.5	21.4
Language and Communication Difficulties	35.3	26.1	38.6
Personal Attitudes About Employment	39.2	30.4	30.4
Slow Job Market	44.9	31.4	23.7
Lack of Easily Accessible Information About the VR Agency	36.4	36.8	26.9
Impact of COVID Pandemic	35.7	36.3	28.0
Lack of Qualified Service Providers to Choose From	34.1	38.4	27.4
Status as a Documented Foreign Worker or Immigrant	23.0	15.3	61.7

■ Sometimes ■ Often ■ Other

Source: 2023 PPRI VR Needs Survey Report

Perceptions of these challenges differed across groups, as shown in Figure 16. Participants, in contrast, were more likely than staff and providers to identify a slow job market as a challenge over other concerns, such as lack of affordable childcare, housing, or transportation, lack of community and family support, and lack of qualified service providers to choose from.

Figure 16. Percent Indicated Challenge was Often a Barrier to Success by Group

| Category	Staff	Providers	Participants
Concern Over Loss of Government Benefits	52	56	41
Lack of Affordable Child Care, Housing, or Transportation	63	66	44
Lack of Community and Family Support	39	50	36
Lack of Easily Accessible Information About the VR Agency	30	43	36
Lack of Reliable Personal Attendant Care	23	39	29
Language and Communication Difficulties	25	33	23
Personal Attitudes About Employment	29	38	27
Slow Job Market	22	31	35
Impact of COVID Pandemic	26	39	38
Lack of Qualified Service Providers to Choose From	59	39	31

Source: 2023 PPRI VR Needs Survey Report

Knowledgeability about Employment and Disability

Respondents indicated that they possessed at least some knowledge of a variety of topics related to employment and disability. Respondents were

most confident in their ability to create accessible documents, assess and make workplace accommodations, and utilize assistive technology and equipment. Conversely, they were least knowledgeable about the Social Security Administration's Program Operations Manual (POMS) and labor market information (LMI) tools. When comparing the results across groups, participants were less likely than staff and providers to indicate that they were knowledgeable about any of these items. According to Figure 17, participants were least knowledgeable about the relationship between employment, government benefits, and disability-related services (9%), and LMI tools (9%).

Figure 17. Percent Very Knowledgeable about Employment and Disability by Group
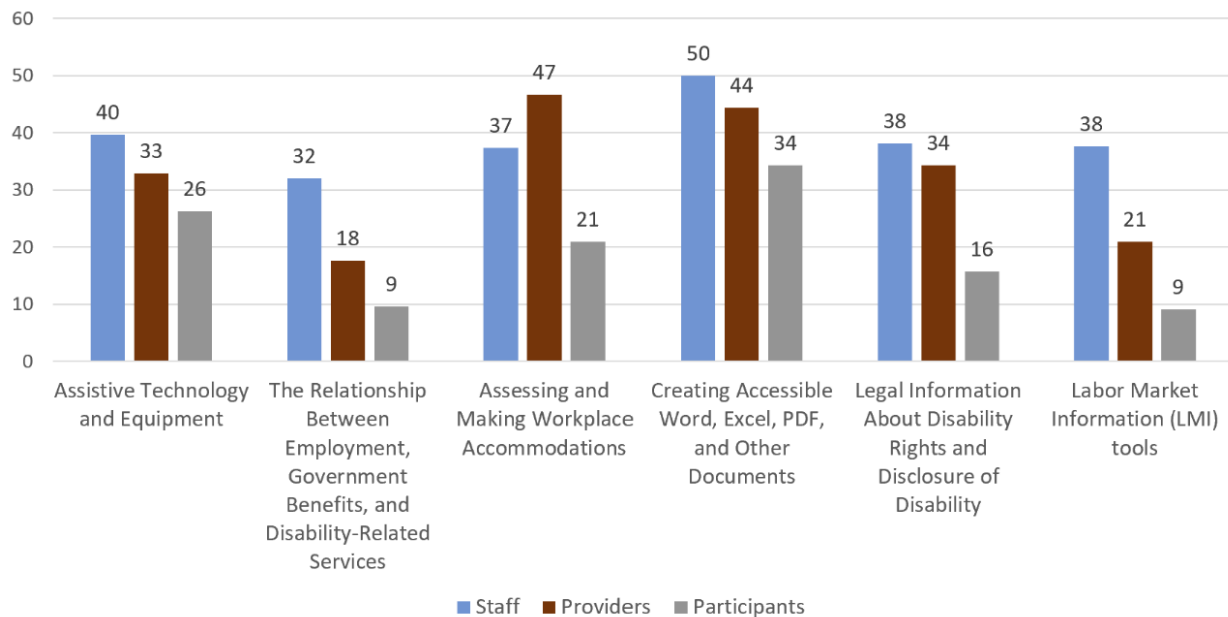
Source: 2023 PPRI VR Needs Survey Report

Customer Satisfaction Surveys

VRD uses Westat, a contractor, to conduct quarterly surveys with VR participants and to analyze and report results. Results of the surveys are used to inform staff of possible performance improvement opportunities. The survey results are reported to VRD on a quarterly basis by State Fiscal Year (SFY), from 1 September to 31 August. From SFY'21 to SFY'23, the surveys were conducted only by telephone; beginning in SFY'24, new modalities for survey responses were introduced, including text and web-based response options. In addition, the survey questionnaire itself was streamlined (the

total number of questions was reduced by half) to increase survey completion rates.

- In SFY'21, 14,774 VR participants completed the survey, including 10,285 active and 4,489 closed cases;
- In SFY'22, 14,810 VR participants completed the survey, including 10,028 active and 4,782 closed cases; and
- In SFY'23, 14,879 VR participants completed the survey, including 10,622 active and 4,257 closed cases.

VR participants generally reported satisfaction with various aspects of their VR case's management. The ratings for several measures were particularly high (over 90% satisfaction), including being treated in a caring, friendly, and respectful manner, agreeing with employment goals, and appointments being within 15 minutes of the scheduled time. For closed cases, over 90 percent of respondents reported satisfaction with their current job and with employee benefits for those who have them. At the same time, around 45% of respondents who were employed at the time of taking the survey indicated that they had no employee benefits.

Questions with lower satisfaction rates included having input into choosing service providers (67-70%); counselors maintaining communication with the customers regarding the process of their cases (75-80%); and VR staff providing needed guidance (80-86%). VRD strategies to address these are discussed in the evaluation of progress section below.

Evaluation of Progress

This section discusses VR service needs and evaluates progress on addressing goals and priorities from the Combined State Plan (CSP) and the 2020 CSNA. The 2023 CSNA determined that the VR program made measurable progress on all CSP goals. The downward trend in client service expenditures and service provision that was associated with a decline in employment rates during the 2020 CSNA period appears to have been reversed. However, there remains room for improvement, and further progress is required to fully achieve the targeted goals and address staff and stakeholder needs. With TWC-VR anticipating strong customer growth over the next two to three program years, addressing these needs is crucial for sustainable and equitable growth, leading to more effective service delivery and quality employment outcomes for VR participants.

Goal 1: Improve provider recruitment, retention, and support.

One of TWC-VR's priorities is to recruit and retain a robust network of providers, including providers of supported employment services, to ensure that our customers have access to a full array of VR services. To improve provider recruitment, retention, and support, TWC-VR launched a business transformation project. After extensive root cause analysis, five strategies were identified to improve the attraction, retention, and availability of VR goods and service providers. Multiple projects were completed within the five strategies, with initial strategic focus placed on reducing vendor requirements and ensuring that payment rates are competitive and equitable. Also, to enhance provider support and training, VRD contracted with UNT WISE to open course registration for the Blind Premium Endorsement in January 2023. The UNT WISE Blind Premium course is self-paced and hosted completely online in the Canvas learning system.

As a result of several conversations with VR counselors, TWC found that the reduction in referrals to service providers was driven in part by staff turnover. Newer staff members did not have relationships with local providers and were not able to easily search for available providers in their area. In response, I|3 built a new Tableau-based provider locator that staff members were able to use to quickly find providers by location and types of services offered. In the first six months of use, the Provider Locator Tool had over 7,000 hits. I|3 also supported VRD in building a data-driven approach to provider recruitment that would target the providers that were most in need based on customer and provider density in geographical areas.

The Trend Analyzer dashboard developed by I|3 will assist VRD in tracking progress in expediting payments to providers. For instance, the dashboard shows that 64% of onboarded providers in PY22 were issued a service authorization within 28 days, indicating most providers are experiencing timely service authorizations. In PY22, the average time from completion of a service authorization to issuing a warrant for the provider is 6 days. This represents a significant improvement from the 18 days in PY21, demonstrating a more efficient service delivery and payment process.

Success Measure

To measure the success of Goal 1, I|3 and VR tracked the number of active contracted providers out of the total number of providers available.

To account for seasonality, provider data was provided to the RCT on a quarterly basis. Active providers were active with an open contract during the quarter. Available providers have been onboarded and are linked to the ReHabWorks case management system. The provider activity rate is the number of active providers divided by the number of available providers.

- Accounting for seasonality, the quarterly number of active contracted providers has increased steadily from PY'20 to PY'22, reflecting progress along this goal. As of Q4 PY'22, TWC-VR was actively using 597 contracted providers, a 10% increase compared to the baseline of 543 in Q4 PY'20.
- In PY'22, there was a more accurate count of available providers in 2022 because of TWC-VR's systematic removal of inactive provider records from ReHabWorks.
- The provider activity rate increased from 51% in Q4 PY'20 (meaning TWC-VR used around half of available contracted providers during the quarter) to nearly 65% in Q4 PY'22 (meaning TWCVR used roughly two-thirds of available contracted providers that quarter).

As discussed earlier in this report, VRD has made substantial progress in using more of its available providers, resulting in increased service delivery. However, to support strong customer growth over the next triennium, VRD will need to make further progress in engaging and training its available provider base, as well as recruiting new providers in rural areas.

In addition, recruitment and training efforts should be targeted at increasing in customers served by providers with the specialized skills associated with premium payment policy (increasing disability specific qualifications and training to better serve customers, especially with most significant disabilities).

Goal 2: Streamline VR policy, process, and procedure and improve workflow processes and tools to facilitate timely services delivery.

TWC-VR's priority is to assist more Texans with disabilities to achieve better employment outcomes, and to have a service delivery system that is efficient, easily accessible, and that maximizes use of available resources. To achieve this priority, TWC-VR streamlined procedures and approval processes to remove unnecessary administrative tasks for staff, providers, and customers.

Success Measure

To measure progress in streamlining procedures and improving workflow processes, TWC-VR tracked quarterly measures of the median time from initial contact to participant status and the percentage of new participants out of the total number of previously eligible customers. A decrease in the median time from initial contact to participant status indicates that efforts to streamline procedures are resulting in more timely service delivery. An increase in the quarterly participant creation rate suggests that process improvement efforts are increasing the number of eligibility determinations that result in actual VR program participation. Success in achieving this goal is measured by the quarterly participant creation rate.

- The median time from initial contact to participant status measured by quarter increased from 100 days in PY'20 to 107 days in PY'22, indicating the need for further process improvement efforts.
- Accounting for seasonality, this participant creation rate stabilized between 89 percent and 90 percent in PY'22, which is an improvement compared to a range of 80 percent to 85 percent prior to PY'20. This indicates that process improvement efforts are resulting in more eligibility determinations leading to actual VR program participation.
- Furthermore, the number of newly signed Individualized Plans for Employment (IPEs) per program year increased by 33 percent to 23,311 in PY'22 compared to PY'20. This indicates that the VR program has expanded its capacity create to facilitate growth.

Goal 3: Recruit and retain VR staff.

TWC-VR is committed to recruiting, retaining, and engaging VR staff to serve Texans with disabilities. A career with TWC-VR must offer meaningful work that helps change lives for the better. TWC-VR will continue to provide career growth, advancement, and opportunities for staff to specialize in areas of interest.

Success Measure

To measure progress in recruiting, retaining, and engaging staff, TWC-VR tracks annual measures of the staff turnover rate and the percentage of counselors that meet TWC-VR standards for Qualified Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (QVRCs). A decrease in the annual turnover rate indicates improvement in staff retention, while an increase in the annual proportion of QVRC indicates progress in helping staff advance and specialize by meeting specific qualifications and competencies.

Success in achieving this goal is measured by comparing the turnover rate and the percentage of QVRC counselors.

- VRD pre-pandemic had an annual turnover rate of 14.7% during the recovery benchmark for performance in SFY2019. In SFY'22 and SFY'23, VRD had a year-to-date turnover rate of 17.8% and 17.3%, respectively, indicating the need for further staff retention efforts.
- Pre-pandemic in SFY 2019, VRD had 91% of counselors that are considered by VRD as QVRC (based on number of counselors not in probationary period). At the end of SFY 2023, this figure was 83.2%, indicating the need for further staff advancement.

Goal 4: Improve and develop additional user-friendly resources to maximize customer choice.

TWC-VR staff need simple, accessible information to help customers make informed decisions concerning their local labor market, how employment may affect their benefits, and the availability of service providers.

Success Measure

Success in achieving this goal is measured by the benefits counseling rate and the percentage of customers indicating they agree (that is, responding "yes") that they have input in choosing service providers in the quarterly customer satisfaction survey (Westat).

- In Q3 PY'21, the benefits counseling rate was 22.9 percent, with 2,571 out of 11,217 SSI/SSDI cases receiving benefits counseling during that quarter. By Q4 PY'22, this rate had significantly improved to 69.1 percent, with 7,620 cases receiving benefits counseling out of the 11,020 SSI/SSDI cases for that quarter.
- Customer satisfaction results from Westat in SFY'22 also showed a slight increase in the percentage of customers indicating that they have input in choosing service providers for open cases. At the same time, the percentage of respondents responding that they agree hovered around 68-72%, leaving room for further improvement.

Goal 5: Improve VR staff knowledge and system capacity to enhance service delivery to customers.

TWC-VR is committed to increasing opportunities for staff to specialize in areas of interest, such as neurodevelopmental disorders, blindness and visual impairments, deaf and hard of hearing, brain injury, transition

students, veterans, behavioral health, and others. TWC-VR is continually enhancing and expanding the division's training on how to use labor market information and partner with employers.

Success Measure

TWC-VR reviews quarterly measures of the percentage of customers indicating they agreed that VR staff provided the guidance the customer needed and the percentage of customers indicating they agreed that the counselor maintained communication with them regarding the process of their case in the customer satisfaction survey. Additionally, TWC-VR tracked the quarterly measure of the proportion of participants who are actively engaged with the VR program. Increases in customer satisfaction regarding staff guidance and counselor communication likely indicate progress in strengthening staff expertise and increasing system capacity. An increase in quarterly VR engagement rate indicates that process improvement efforts and innovative service delivery approaches are helping counselors serve customers more effectively.

- In terms of success, TWC-VR observed a slight increase of about two percentage points for customers with open (active) cases indicating they agreed (i.e., responding 'yes') that VR staff provided the guidance they needed in the customer satisfaction survey.
- TWC-VR saw a gradual increase in the percentage of customers with open (active) cases indicating they agreed (i.e., responding 'yes') in the Westat customer satisfaction survey that the counselor maintained communication with them regarding the process of their case.
- Accounting for seasonality, the quarterly VR engagement rate has increased in PY'22 to a range of 70 – 74 percent, compared to a range of 65 to 72 percent in PY'20. This indicates that in PY'22 a higher percentage of VR participants are actively engaged with the VR program.
- There is still room for improvement, in particular engaging specific customer populations (such as blind and visually impaired and IDD) as well as customers in more rural areas.

As TWC-VR is poised for strong customer growth over the next two-three program years, further efforts to increase system capacity and staff knowledge of disability-related service needs and labor market information tools will help to facilitate effective service delivery and more quality employment outcomes.

Goal 6: Increase and enhance partnerships with employers to 1) understand employer needs, and 2) build awareness about the benefits of hiring people with disabilities.

TWC-VR values its partnerships with employers and wants to 1) better understand employer needs when hiring people with disabilities and working with VR collaboratively, and 2) build awareness about the benefits of hiring people with disabilities to increase employment opportunities for VR customers. TWC-VR continually promotes and supports hiring, retention, and advancement of individuals with disabilities across industries. TWC-VR collaborates with its Texas workforce system partners to participate in joint strategies that address employers' workforce needs.

The Summer Earn and Learn (SEAL) program is the largest employer partnership administered by TWC-VR and its local Workforce Board partners. Students participating in the program complete work readiness training and are partnered with a local employer for a five-week minimum paid internship. Worksites include statewide employers and local businesses. Students gain valuable and transferrable work skills while the employer gets hands-on support and a chance to work closely with students. Each of the 28 Workforce Boards coordinate with TWC-VR to assist in recruiting employers and supporting the program. The current number of students confirmed as placed in paid work experience in summer 2023 was 2,959. In summer 2022, 2,853 students completed work readiness training and a total of 2,516 were placed in a paid work experience.

TWC-VR has initiatives for adult customers that provide job skills training and paid work experience that has the potential of turning into permanent employment. The Skills Training to Employment Project (STEP) provides training focused on job readiness and acquisition of work skills needed to gain employment with the participating employers. The STEP model is currently in operation with Walgreens Distribution Center, McLane Corporation, Caterpillar, Enterprise Holdings, Harris Health Systems, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, University of Texas Health in Tyler, Toyotetsu, and Nacogdoches Memorial Hospital. Additional STEP sites are being developed, which include the City of San Antonio.

TWC-VR is also an active partner in Project SEARCH, a school-to-work program that offers classroom instruction, career exploration, and hands-on training through work site rotations. Project SEARCH sites represent

partnerships between TWC-VR, host businesses, independent school districts (ISDs), employment service providers, local IDD Authorities, and Boards and their Workforce Solutions contractors. For the 2023-2024 school year, Texas has 30 Project SEARCH sites that are within various industries across the state. Each site typically serves eight to twelve participants per school year. Additionally, three new Project Search sites will begin serving VR customers in August 2024.

The results of two evaluations conducted by I|3 illustrate the positive impact of participation in Project SEARCH on VR program outcomes. For instance, during PY'20 to PY'22, Project SEARCH participants were 1.4 times more likely to achieve successful closure than non-participants in the control group. Please see the summary section at the beginning of this report for additional details on these evaluations.

Success Measure

A success measure was not formally developed for this goal for PY'22 and PY'23. However, building relationships with a greater number of businesses as stakeholders will facilitate employment and retention for a greater number of VR participants. Success measures for this current CSP period would include increasing the number of unique employers hiring VR participants second quarter after exit as well as the number of employers who have retained VR participants during the second through fourth quarter after exit.

Conclusion

The 2023 CSNA analyzed data from the VR program in Texas during PY'20 to PY'22 to identify VR service needs. Stakeholders, including customers, service providers and VR staff, provided feedback and recommendations for improving VR services to Texans with disabilities. Analysis of the virtual town halls and the TAMU VR needs survey revealed that mentions of perceived needs closely aligned, supporting the validity of these information sources, and providing a more in-depth view of perceptions that customers have about the VR program.

During this CSNA period, the VR program's employment rate increased by 3.3 percentage points, from 47.6% in PY'20 to 50.9% in PY'22. The growth in employment was accompanied by increased client service expenditures, reversing previous spending and service provision declines noted in the 2020 CSNA. From PY'20 to PY'22, the VR program consistently served more customers, particularly students with disabilities. A business transformation

project and ongoing process improvements have led to higher provider activity and participant creation rates, setting the stage for robust growth in VR participants. The 2023 CSNA also determined that the VR program made measurable progress on all Comprehensive State Plan (CSP) goals. However, there remains room for improvement and further progress is required to fully achieve the targeted CSP goals.

Three overarching categories of needs were voiced in the town halls, key informant interviews, and TAMU Needs survey, including 1) supporting and training a robust network of providers to ensure access to equitable and diverse services; 2) recovering and maintaining sufficient staff and expertise to effectively serve job seekers with disabilities, including labor market knowledgeability; and 3) expanding and maintaining a diverse network of employers to recruit, train, and employ individuals with disabilities.

Stakeholders and CSNA information sources identified a need for more informed customer choices and an increased variety of provider options. All stakeholder groups expressed the need for enhanced training on LMI utilization and tools offered by TWC. They also advocated for educating employers about the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities. Staff turnover was mentioned as a challenge for both customers and providers in terms of receiving consistent and accurate information about VR policies and procedures. Customers cited delays in services or communication interruptions with the VR program due to prolonged vacancies or having several changes in counselors over a short period. Respondents to the online VR needs survey highlighted several service-related challenges that hinder successful VR outcomes including: 1) lack of affordable childcare, housing, and transportation, 2) lack of easily accessible information about benefits and incentives, 3) employer perceptions of people with disabilities, and 4) lack of qualified service providers to choose from.

Town hall attendees also identified the need to reduce VR counselor workloads by hiring additional staff. They noted that this would help retain experienced staff, improve service continuity, and enhance response times. Attendees also emphasized the need for comprehensive training for new staff on referral processes, documentation, and community resources to address knowledge gaps. Key informants also cited the need for more technology-based solutions to streamline service delivery and provide accessible information resources for staff. They also underscored the need for more diverse provider options and improvements in provider rates, reimbursement and payment processes. Customers frequently cited limited

provider availability, especially in rural areas, necessitating travel to other cities for services. Providers reported outdated reimbursement rates and delayed payments, causing financial strain and loss of providers.

The apparent VR service needs identified by this report will guide TWC's VR Division in making programmatic improvements and enhancements to help obtain meaningful employment for customers, including the development of strategies to better leverage relationships with employers and collaborative partners. TWC will continuously collect and analyze data to further assess additional needs of Texans with disabilities and progress toward meeting the CSP goals discussed in the previous section.
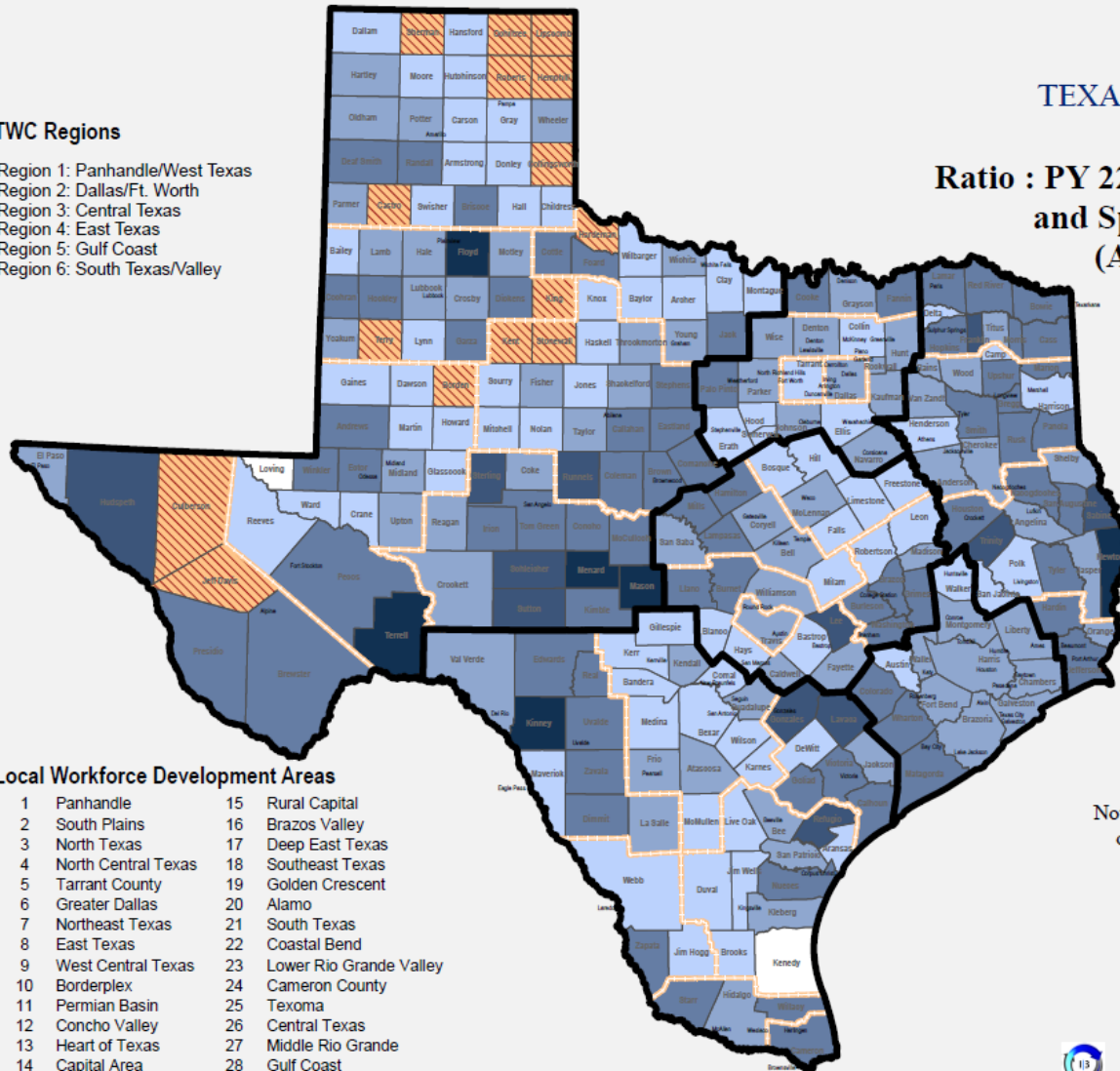
Appendix A: Pre-ETS Heat Map

TEXAS WORKFORCE COMMISSION

Ratio : PY 22 Pre ETS Customers / TEA 504 and Special Education Students (Age 14 - 21) SY 22 - 23

TWC Regions

Region 1: Panhandle/West Texas
Region 2: Dallas/Ft. Worth
Region 3: Central Texas
Region 4: East Texas
Region 5: Gulf Coast
Region 6: South Texas/Valley

Legend

- TWC Region
- LWDA (with color)
- County
- 0%
- 1% - 5%
- 6% - 10%
- 11% - 25%
- 26% - 50%
- 51% - 100%
- No TEA Students (Zero Denominator)

data as of 10/03/2023

Note: The white areas are where there are no 504 Students or Special Education Students according to TEA Data

Local Workforce Development Areas

#	Area	#	Area
1	Panhandle	15	Rural Capital
2	South Plains	16	Brazos Valley
3	North Texas	17	Deep East Texas
4	North Central Texas	18	Southeast Texas
5	Tarrant County	19	Golden Crescent
6	Greater Dallas	20	Alamo
7	Northeast Texas	21	South Texas
8	East Texas	22	Coastal Bend
9	West Central Texas	23	Lower Rio Grande Valley
10	Borderplex	24	Cameron County
11	Permian Basin	25	Texoma
12	Concho Valley	26	Central Texas
13	Heart of Texas	27	Middle Rio Grande
14	Capital Area	28	Gulf Coast

Information Innovation & Insight Division - I|3

TEXAS WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS
Geographic Information Systems

No. 20231019

Appendix A displays a heat map provided by the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) showing the ratio of PY'22 Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) customers to Texas Education Agency (TEA) 504 and special education students (aged 14-21) for School Year 2022-2023. The map divides the state of Texas into integrated service areas (TWC Regions), each containing local workforce development areas (Boards) comprising various counties. Each county is color-coded based on the ratio of TWC Pre-ETS customers to TEA students receiving special education services and 504 accommodations as of October 3, 2023. For detailed information by county, refer to Table 21 below.

TWC Regions:

1. Region 1: Panhandle/West Texas
2. Region 2: Dallas/Ft. Worth
3. Region 3: Central Texas
4. Region 4: East Texas
5. Region 5: Gulf Coast
6. Region 6: South Texas/Valley

Local Workforce Development Areas (Boards):

1. Panhandle
2. South Plains
3. North Texas
4. North Central Texas
5. Tarrant County
6. Greater Dallas
7. Northeast Texas
8. East Texas
9. West Central Texas
10. Borderplex
11. Permian Basin
12. Concho Valley
13. Heart of Texas
14. Capital Area
15. Rural Capital
16. Brazos Valley
17. Deep East Texas
18. Southeast Texas
19. Golden Crescent
20. Alamo
21. South Texas
22. Coastal Bend
23. Lower Rio Grande Valley
24. Cameron County
25. Texoma
26. Central Texas
27. Middle Rio Grande
28. Gulf Coast

Table 21. TWC Pre-ETS Customers as a Percentage of TEA SPED and 504 Counts by County, PY22

Percentage Range	Counties
Up to 5%	Aransas, Archer, Armstrong, Austin, Bailey, Bandera, Bastrop, Baylor, Bexar, Blanco, Bosque, Brooks, Camp, Carson, Childress, Clay, Collin, Comal, Crane, Dallam, Dawson, Delta, Dewitt, Donley, Duval, Ellis, Erath, Falls, Freestone, Gaines, Gillespie, Glasscock, Gray, Hall, Hansford, Harrison, Haskell, Hays, Henderson, Hill, Hood, Howard, Hutchinson, Jim Hogg, Jim Wells, Jones, Karnes, Kerr, Knox, Leon, Limestone, Live Oak, Lynn, Martin, Maverick, McMullen, Medina, Milam, Mitchell, Montague, Moore, Nolan, Polk, Reeves, Robertson, San Jacinto, Scurry, Somervell, Swisher, Tarrant, Walker, Ward, Webb, Wilbarger, Wilson
6% to 10%	Anderson, Angelina, Atascosa, Bee, Bell, Brazoria, Caldwell, Chambers, Cherokee, Coke, Coryell, Crockett, Crosby, Dallas, Denton, El Paso, Fayette, Fisher, Fort Bend, Frio, Galveston, Grayson, Guadalupe, Hale, Harris, Hartley, Hidalgo, Hunt, Jackson, Jasper, Johnson, Kaufman, Kendall, Kleberg, La Salle, Lamb, Liberty, Lubbock, Madison, McLennan, Midland, Montgomery, Motley, Navarro, Oldham, Orange, Parker, Parmer, Potter, Rains, Reagan, Rockwall, San Patricio, San Saba, Shackelford, Shelby, Taylor, Throckmorton, Titus, Travis, Upton, Val Verde, Van Zandt, Waller, Wheeler, Wichita, Williamson, Wise, Wood, Yoakum, Young

Percentage Range	Counties
11% to 25%	Andrews, Bowie, Brazos, Brewster, Briscoe, Brown, Burleson, Burnet, Calhoun, Callahan, Cameron, Cass, Cochran, Coleman, Colorado, Comanche, Concho, Cooke, Cottle, Deaf Smith, Dickens, Dimmit, Eastland, Ector, Edwards, Fannin, Foard, Garza, Goliad, Gregg, Grimes, Hamilton, Hardin, Hockley, Hopkins, Houston, Irion, Jack, Jefferson, Kimble, Lamar, Lampasas, Llano, Marion, Matagorda, McCulloch, Mills, Morris, Nacogdoches, Nueces, Palo Pinto, Panola, Pecos, Presidio, Randall, Real, Red River, Rusk, San Augustine, Smith, Starr, Stephens, Tom Green, Tyler, Upshur, Uvalde, Victoria, Washington, Wharton, Willacy, Winkler, Zapata, Zavala
26% to 50%	Franklin, Gonzales, Hudspeth, Lavaca, Lee, Refugio, Runnels, Sabine, Schleicher, Sterling, Sutton, Trinity
Over 50%	Floyd, Kinney, Mason, Menard, Newton, Terrell

Note: There are counties where there are no 504 or special education students according to TEA data, including Kenedy and Loving counties. Additionally, several counties do not have any VR customers: Borden, Castro, Culberson, Collingsworth, Hardeman, Hemphill, Jeff Davis, Kent, King, Lipscomb, Ochiltree, Roberts, Sherman, Stonewall, Terry.