

REHABILITATION COUNCIL OF TEXAS 2024 ANNUAL REPORT

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
THE TEXAS WORKFORCE COMMISSION



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Messages

Message from Council Chair Gennadiy Goldenshteyn

As Fiscal Year 2024 (FY 2024) comes to a close, I reflect with pride on the accomplishments of the Rehabilitation Council of Texas (RCT) over the past 12 months and eagerly look forward to the year ahead. FY 2024 marked my second year as chairman of the RCT, and I am deeply grateful to my fellow council members for continuing to place their trust in me to lead the council with purpose and poise. I would like to extend a special thank you to RCT Coordinator Lisa Godwin, whose remarkable dedication has been integral to the council's smooth and productive work.



I firmly believe that meaningful employment and career opportunities are fundamental human rights. As a council, it is our mission to ensure that all Texans with disabilities have access to effective vocational rehabilitation (VR) services that lead to competitive, integrated employment, greater independence, and community participation. There is much to be proud of, as the numerous achievements and success stories highlighted throughout this report attest.

In 2024, we continued to strengthen our collaboration with key stakeholders, including members of the disability community, Texas Workforce Commission VR team (TWC-VR), TWC leadership, VR service providers, advocacy groups, employers, and federal agencies. We also expanded our outreach across the state to ensure that all regions and communities, regardless of geographic location or disability category, are heard and respected. By embracing customer feedback, data, and analytical methods, we have enhanced our ability to provide targeted guidance to TWC-VR, helping to continually improve and evolve VR services for all Texans.

We are deeply grateful for the ongoing support and partnership of TWC Chairman Bryan Daniel, Commissioner Alberto Treviño III, Commissioner Joe Esparza, TWC Executive Director Edward Serna, and TWC-VR Director Cheryl Fuller, along with their teams. It is with sadness that I report Cheryl's decision to retire as of October 31. Cheryl has been a dedicated public servant and a tremendous ally to all Texans with disabilities. I will personally treasure our friendship and wish her all the best in her future endeavors. While Cheryl's replacement has not yet been named, we are confident that our partnership with TWC-VR leadership will continue to grow even stronger.

Please enjoy this annual report—there is much to celebrate. Here's to an even brighter 2025!

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, sweeping 'G' followed by a horizontal line.

Gennadiy Goldenshteyn
RCT Chairman

Message from Vocational Rehabilitation Division Director Cheryl Fuller



As director of the Texas Workforce Commission Vocational Rehabilitation (TWC-VR) program, it is my honor, on behalf of TWC, to partner with the Rehabilitation Council of Texas (RCT) to ensure that individuals with disabilities have opportunities to pursue meaningful employment and a clear path to full participation in the growing Texas economy.

As Fiscal Year 2024 (FY 2024) concludes, I'm inspired by the accomplishments of our VR customers who have achieved their employment goals. I'm also grateful for the TWC-VR professionals and contracted service providers across the state who have worked alongside them to provide the services and supports to help our customers achieve that success.

Individuals with disabilities are hard-working Texans ready to apply their talents in our dynamic workforce. Our state's thriving economy offers these resilient workers an opportunity to earn a living, achieve independence, and build a career.

As we begin a new fiscal year, our priority is to assist more Texans with disabilities to achieve their employment goals by providing quality services, engaging our communities, establishing new partnerships, and continuing to raise awareness among Texas employers about the benefits of hiring people with disabilities. We will also continue to build our partnerships with independent school districts to provide Pre-employment Transition Services to even more Texas students with disabilities.

Finally, 2024 marks the start of our work together to implement the goals and strategies in the VR portion of the new Texas Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Combined State Plan for Program Years 2024–2027. I look forward to our continued partnership as we launch strategies for the six major goal areas in the new plan and build on the progress we made on the prior state plan.

Our work together is guided by our joint vision, which is that people with disabilities have quality jobs and meaningful careers and are fully participating in work and in their communities.

Cheryl Fuller
VR Division Director

About the Rehabilitation Council of Texas

The Rehabilitation Council of Texas (RCT) advises the state's designated Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program on policy, scope, and effectiveness of services. The RCT is federally mandated by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by WIOA.

The RCT helps ensure that Texans with disabilities have access to effective VR services that result in competitive and integrated employment, greater independence, and community participation. Bylaws that are designed to support this goal govern the RCT.

The Texas governor appoints members for three-year terms to represent a diverse range of individuals with disabilities and community perspectives. They are charged with being the voice of VR service recipients.

The RCT participates in the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils to promote a nationally consistent vision for VR priorities, goals, and outcomes.



Mission, Values, and Responsibilities

Mission

The Rehabilitation Council of Texas (RCT) mission is to advise and partner with the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) and Texas Workforce Solutions-Vocational Rehabilitation Services (TWS-VRS) to ensure Texans with disabilities have access to an effective service delivery system leading to employment.

Values

- The worth and dignity of each individual
- The right to choose, which is realized by access to full information
- Work opportunities, which open doors to individual independence and participation in community life
- Person-centered goals, service plans, and delivery systems leading to individual success
- Shared roles and responsibilities to improve customer satisfaction with the rehabilitation process and outcomes
- Collaboration and partnership with federal, state, and private agencies for system improvement

Responsibilities

- Review, analyze, and advise the state vocational rehabilitation programs on performance, effectiveness, customer satisfaction, responsibilities, functions, and eligibility, including the need for order of selection
- Submit reports of progress of the vocational rehabilitation program to the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) commissioner
- Help prepare the State Plan for the Vocational Rehabilitation Services program and develop a description of the council's input and recommendations as a part of the plan
- Review and analyze the vocational rehabilitation program effectiveness, including an assessment of customer satisfaction and the vocational rehabilitation needs of Texans with disabilities
- Submit an annual report that highlights vocational rehabilitation services' goals, achievements, and statistics to the Texas governor and RSA commissioner
- Coordinate working relationships between the state vocational rehabilitation program, State Independent Living Council (SILC), and Centers for Independent Living in Texas
- Coordinate activities with other councils to avoid duplication of efforts and increase the number of individuals served

Committees

The following committees are responsible for upholding the mission, values, and responsibilities of the RCT in partnership with representatives from the state VR programs.

Executive Committee

Committee Chair: Gennadiy Goldenshteyn. The Executive Committee is composed of chair, vice chair, and all committee chairs. This committee coordinates with state VR programs' leadership; develops quarterly meeting agendas; develops public outreach materials; and reviews the RCT's budget, bylaws, and amendments.

Membership and Education Committee

Committee Chair: Emily Heise. The Membership and Education Committee educates RCT members about federal and state legislation and how to best represent the interest of Texans with disabilities, recruits new members, plans and oversees new member orientation activities, and develops and implements mentorships for new members.

Planning and Review Committee

Committee Chair: Peggy Schmidt. The Planning and Review Committee helps set and evaluate progress toward goals and priorities for the WIOA Combined State Plan for the VR program, recommends ways to improve VR services, and receives public comment.

Policy, Procedure, and Personnel Development Committee

Committee Chair: Karen Stanfill. The Policy, Procedures, and Personnel Development Committee comments on changes to VR policy; reviews appeals decisions; and monitors procedural changes, staffing, training, and impartial hearing officer selection.

Customer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment Committee

Committee Chair: Lisa Cowart. Customer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment Committee reviews customer satisfaction survey results and other program data, addresses service concerns, and helps steer a statewide needs assessment every three years.



Our Work in Fiscal Year 2024

Year in Review

Full Council by Chair Gennadiy Goldenshteyn

The RCT had a very active FY 2024. While our committee chairs will outline the notable accomplishments of their respective committees later in this report, I would like to highlight several key council-wide activities and achievements below.

Membership

This year, we welcomed both reappointed and new members to the council:

- Reappointed Members:
 - Jennifer Clouse
 - Gennadiy Goldenshteyn
 - Emily Heise
- New Members:
 - Patrick Sturdivant, replacing April Pollreisz
 - Jordan Smelley, replacing Michael Ebbeler
 - Kiffany Jefferson, replacing Amanda Bowdoin
 - Michelle Harper, replacing Lindsey Geeslin
 - Norine Gill, replacing Rodrick Robinson

We extend our gratitude to the departing members for their service and warmly welcome the fresh perspectives and dedication of our new members.

Stakeholder Engagement

In 2024, one of the council's primary goals was to ensure we continued to proactively represent stakeholders from across Texas' vast and diverse regions. It is essential for council members to gain firsthand perspectives from communities throughout the state. To support this, two of our four quarterly meetings were held outside Austin TWC-VR headquarters—one in Houston (Region 3) and the other in Tyler (Region 2). During these meetings, we had the privilege of engaging directly with regional VR leadership, VR frontline staff, VR customers, employers, and provider partners. Many of their stories are featured in this report. Such firsthand exposure ensures that our efforts reflect the voices and needs of all Texans.

In 2025, we will continue to hold meetings across different regions in Texas, using our hybrid meeting format to provide full accessibility for all participants, regardless of location or disability status.

We continue to benefit from extremely productive partnerships with key stakeholders, including the Client Assistance Program (CAP, Liaison: Karen Stanfill), Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRP, Liaison: Peggy Schmidt), Partners Resource Network (PRN, Liaison: Lisa Cowart), State Independent Living Council (SILC, Liaison: Patrick Sturdivant), Texas Education Agency (TEA, Liaison: Emily Heise), and the Texas Workforce Investment Council (TWIC, Liaison: Michele Harper).

Strengthening the Relationship with TWC and VR Division

Our work is supported by the strong partnership we have with TWC-VR leadership and staff, and the Governor's Appointments Office. In 2024, we deepened this relationship by continuing to collaborate closely with TWC-VR leadership to interpret stakeholder feedback, work through budgetary issues and resource constraints, provide meaningful input into the state plan, and prioritize key VR initiatives. TWC leadership—including Chairman Bryan Daniel, Commissioner Alberto Treviño III, Commissioner Joe Esparza, and Executive Director Edward Serna—remain engaged and supportive advocates for our work.

To ensure a strong, continued relationship between the RCT and TWC, we have renewed the memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the two entities. This updated MOU ensures that the necessary resources are provided for the RCT to effectively carry out its functions under Section 105 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The agreement establishes the appropriate level of support and collaboration for the next five years.

Executive Director Serna provides invaluable support by helping the RCT better understand the broader services and benefits that TWC offers to VR customers, in addition to the actual VR services provided by the TWC-VR. We continue to be grateful for the opportunity to influence TWC's wider efforts in supporting both current and potential VR customers across the state.

State and National Collaboration

In 2024, RCT members remained active on the national stage. Multiple RCT members attended the fall and spring conferences of the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC), the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), and the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB). These events provided opportunities to share best practices with peers from other states and learn directly from the US Department of Education's RSA on current trends and future expectations.

RCT Bylaws and Planning for 2025

The RCT Ad-Hoc Bylaws Committee conducted a comprehensive review and overhaul of the RCT bylaws to enhance the RCT's effectiveness in carrying out its responsibilities. Among the most impactful changes were revisions to the membership guidelines enabling passionate members to reengage with the RCT more easily after the completion of their current term, ensuring the whole council is involved in reviewing the state plan as well as clearer, more robust guidelines for officer elections. These updates were officially ratified at our February quarterly meeting.

In September 2024, the RCT held its annual strategic planning session, hosted by our partners at Disability Rights Texas. During this two-day off-site session, RCT members took a broader look at our mission and vision, reviewed our 2024 accomplishments, reflected on areas for improvement, and developed a robust plan for 2025. We extend our thanks to Ms. Lucy Gafford of the University of North Texas for her outstanding facilitation of the session.

In 2024, we experienced progress, growth, and accomplishment. We look forward to an even more dynamic and productive 2025.

Membership and Education Committee by Chair Emily Heise

During FY 2024, the Membership and Education Committee committed to adhere to the actions set forth by the Executive Committee during the Strategic Planning Conference in September 2024. The committee held virtual meetings prior to each quarterly RCT meeting to discuss the following topics:

- Updates on any legislation that may potentially affect VR
- Review membership terms of each RCT member and work on council vacancies
- Coordinate with RCT chair on speakers for quarterly RCT meetings
- Hold elections for officer positions consistent with RCT bylaws

After working with the actions that were established, the committee reviewed current actions and expanded on those actions from discussions during the Strategic Planning Conference. This has allowed for clarification and strengthening of the actions outlined for the committee to follow while maintaining the integrity of the RCT. The Membership and Education Committee will develop and coordinate a plan to educate the new members of the RCT by:

- reviewing and updating the RCT New Member Orientation and onboarding process by:
 - condensing the current VRTAC-QM training; and
 - developing a schedule for the onboarding process to align with new members joining the RCT
- developing a pool of applicants to assist the process of recruitment for council positions that are consistent with the composition requirements and include underrepresented populations; and
 - develop a process of soliciting candidates from external stakeholders and attend conferences to market the importance of the RCT
- assisting the public engagement ad-hoc committee to increase public awareness.

The Membership and Education Committee will also focus its time coordinating with the Executive Committee to identify critical training needs and develop an annual training plan to implement in FY 2025.

Policy, Procedures, and Personnel Development Committee by Chair Karen Stanfill

The Policy, Procedures, and Personnel Development Committee comments on changes to VR policy, reviews appeals decisions, and monitors procedural changes, staffing, training, and impartial hearing officer selection.

The committee collaborated with TWS-VRS on several items during the year, including a review and provision of feedback on the redesign of the policy manual, discussion on ways to hire and retain staff, and input on new and ongoing services.

TWS-VRS contracted with an outside entity to help redesign and create an easier policy manual to navigate. After completion of the policy manual, RCT was given time in advance to view and make comments. The new policy manual is now online. The committee will continue to provide input and comments to reach and maintain that goal.

TWS-VRS continues to seek qualified applicants for open positions. The committee continues to engage in discussions to help recruit and maintain staff. The committee was successful in collaborating with TWS-VRS to change policy allowing for exceptions for merit raises for a Counselor I who has not yet been accepted into a graduate program. Secondly, the committee encouraged TWS-VRS to continue to hire part-time temporary staff to help on vacant caseloads.

The committee is very active with TWS-VRS regarding proposing new policy and editing of existing policy. We collaborated to provide written guidance for staff in respect to the training of service animals.

TWS-VRS and the committee have been in discussion to bring the service of customized employment to Texas. TWS-VRS had initiated a pilot project with the help of the University of San Diego and Griffin-Hammis Associates. The committee provided input on the written guidance for the pilot.

The committee provided feedback on policy relating to reducing the number of approval steps staff members must follow to provide services. TWS-VRS agreed with the feedback regarding removal of a proposed policy requiring approval to allow more than two trial work experiences. A committee member is representing the council on a work project reviewing the policies of self-employment.

Agency staff are always available to meet with our committee, and we have received presentations on contracts, exit staff surveys, and recruitment.

Customer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment Committee by Chair Lisa Cowart

The Customer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment (CSNA) Committee continued its work of shaping the future of VR services in Texas by reviewing customer satisfaction survey results and other program data, addressing service concerns, and reviewing the final statewide needs assessment survey that is conducted every three years.

In 2024, the committee received the final report for the 2023 CSNA. Some of the 2023 CSNA report highlights included the following:

- **Total Number of Town Halls:** Five virtual and in-person town hall meetings were held in April and May 2023. Town halls were held virtually using Zoom.
- **Breakdown by Group:** Three main groups made up over two-thirds (68 percent) of the attendees: VR service providers, TWC staff members, and customers/caregivers. Approximately 35 percent of attendees were VR providers.
- **Themes:** The top three overarching themes included staffing and workloads, customer choice and provider availability/training, and labor market knowledgeability/business partnerships.

Anyone interested in learning more can view a copy of the final CSNA report at: src-texas.org/documents/

Quarterly, the committee reviews the VR Customer Satisfaction Survey results conducted by Westat. The surveys are designed to address and monitor the VR program and issues within the VR process and to identify strengths and improvement opportunities, and then works with TWC staff to implement necessary improvements.

Input and Recommendations

The Rehabilitation Council of Texas (RCT) met quarterly with leaders from the Texas Workforce Commission Vocational Rehabilitation Division (TWC VR). During these meetings TWC VR leadership and staff provided updates, training, and discussion with the RCT on various initiatives and programs with the RCT. Conference calls were held as well to review changes in VR policy, a policy manuals, and the combined state plan. RCT used information gathered from these meetings and report such as Customer Satisfaction Reports, Designated State Unit's Performance Report and the Statewide Needs Assessment Reports, to make informed recommendations.

RCT uses a committee structure to provide focused review and comment. These committees are: Executive Committee; Membership and Education Committee; Planning and Review Committee; Policy, Procedures, and Personnel Development; and Customer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment Committee. The interaction with TWC VR included exchanges of information to achieve greater clarity and understanding. While the detail work is done in the committee structure, all comments and recommendation are made from the full RCT.

The following is a summary of the input and recommendations made to TWC VR for fiscal year 2024.

Recommendation 1:

The RCT recommends TWC-VR request more state general revenue funds to pull down our federal funds which will allow more clients to be served.

Response:

Due to the recent and projected growth in client service expenditures, TWC-VR is working with TWC's Finance Division to evaluate expenditures and participants served and prepare an exceptional item proposal for inclusion in the agency's next legislative appropriations request.

Recommendation 2:

The RCT wrote a letter to Texas Workforce Commission-Vocational Rehabilitation, (TWC-VR), requesting that the income level requirement for customers and families be raised and provided the example from Pennsylvania raising the income level to \$100,000 before a customer or family would be required to participate in the cost of services. The RCT recommends TWC-VR proceed with the request from the council and as recommended from the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and raise the financial income level for a customer or family before they would be asked to participate in services.

Response:

Current cost participation requirements are based on 300 percent of the federal poverty level. TWC-VR is nearing completion of a review of the impact of cost participation policies, including the impact of eliminating such requirements. TWC-VR anticipates developing a proposal for revising current policy and rules in FY 2024.

Recommendation 3:

Table 2: Racial and Ethnic Distribution

Recommendation: The current breakdown of the table showing the racial and ethnicity of the Texas Workforce Commission/Vocational Rehabilitation, TWC-VR staff is categorized as either Hispanic or racial minority. Recommend breaking the racial minority section down further as captured by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) data, such as by African American, Asian, etc.

Response:

As recommended, TWC-VR has included updated information that expands the breakdown of other minorities for TWC-VR Staff including Black, Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Not specified, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and two or more races.

Recommendation 4:

- (b) Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA). Section 101(a)(15), (17), and (23) of the Rehabilitation Act require VR agencies to provide an assessment of:
- (A) Individuals with disabilities who are minorities and individuals with disabilities who have been unserved or underserved by the VR program;

Table 2: Racial and Ethnic Distribution

The Rehabilitation Council of Texas (RCT) recommends TWC-VR further define the racial minorities in the table beyond Hispanic and racial minorities and include the breakdown of racial minorities, such as African American, Asian, and other categories that are captured for RSA data. Also recommend further identifying the severity of disability in the categories as well.

Response:

As recommended, TWC-VR has included updated information that expands the breakdown of minorities to include Black or African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, some other race, and two or more races. The information also breaks down each minority listed above and the severity of the disability categories.

Recommendation 5:

Goal one of the priorities focuses on the recruiting and retention of staff. RCT encourages the agency to increase the knowledge of counselors to be able to help customers. This includes the areas of disability training, and working with employers and training they will need in the future.

Response:

TWC-VR will review current training available to counselors to identify additional training opportunities and other strategies to increase counselor knowledge in the areas of disability and working with employers.

Recommendation 6:

Much of the new counselor training is computer-based training (CBT) and has lost the person to person feedback and discussion. Recommend the agency obtain feedback from the counselors and managers to determine the effectiveness of this training method.

Response:

New counselor training was redesigned based upon feedback solicited from VR counselors and managers. Both counselors and managers requested training be provided sooner in the new counselor's tenure, allowing new counselors to begin training closer to their start date, and asking that training content be available to them as an ongoing resource after they complete the courses the first time. TWC-VR also agrees that in-person training provides an important learning environment that supports interaction and collaboration.

Based on this feedback, TWC-VR worked closely with TWC's Training & Development department to create a hybrid new counselor training, in which certain components are available online and certain courses are conducted in-person. There are six courses in the hybrid new counselor training: three courses are computer-based training (CBT) classes for a total of 3.5 hours. Three courses are classroom training courses (in-person) for a total of 60 hours. TWC-VR believes that this new format is effective. The CBT courses allow new counselors to begin training much faster, are self-paced, and make foundational content easily accessible as an ongoing reference. These classroom-based courses comprise 94% of the total 63.5 hours of required training.

Recommendation 7:

Goal 2 Improve provider recruitment, retention, and support. RCT is appreciative of the efforts made in the past year to streamline processes and would like to continue to address this goal during the next year with TWC-VR. One area of interest is to revisit the community rehabilitation program (CRP) credentialing and recertification process. We would like to work together to make this system more beneficial for the providers as well as the customers. This may include the re-certifying process looking different than it does now, which is to watch the same content videos that have already been viewed. We would also like to recommend other timing and options to view the recorded videos.

Response:

TWC-VR, in collaboration with the University of North Texas Workplace Inclusion and Sustainable Employment (UNT WISE), is reviewing options for streamlining the credentialing and recertification process, including but not limited to decreasing the required number of Continued Education Units and updating materials to decrease assignments without compromising essential curriculum. In addition, TWC-VR is reviewing certain courses to ensure content is updated regularly to align with changes in policy and processes. TWC-VR looks forward to receiving feedback and suggestions from RCT on current and future revisions.

Recommendation 8:

Goal 3: Streamline VR policy, processes, and procedure to improve workflow processes and provide tools to facilitate timely service delivery.

Recommendation: The RCT recommends that the approval processes for service delivery be reduced. While the RCT understands the goal and importance of guidance to TWC-VR counselors, the processes that exist in policy appear to actually delay the provision of services. The RCT is willing and able to assist in achieving this request.

Response:

TWC-VR has implemented an annual review of approval processes to identify opportunities to reduce or streamline approvals while also ensuring appropriate internal controls. TWC-VR looks forward to RCT feedback on approvals that may create unnecessary delays while not contributing to a balanced system of internal controls.

Recommendation 9:

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

Recommendation to add information available in the provider locator tool, or other avenue of the availability and ratings of service providers.

Response:

TWC-VR shares RCT's interest in continued enhancement of the provider locator tool to include additional information that will support customer informed choice in providers. TWC-VR will confer with TWC's Division of Information, Innovation, and Insight (I|3) to determine enhancements that can be implemented with currently available data, as well as enhancements that may require collection of additional data (such as ratings).

Recommendation 10:

Goal 6: Increase and enhance partnerships with employers to 1) better understand employer needs when hiring people with disabilities and working with VR collaboratively, and to 2) build awareness about the benefits of hiring people with disabilities to increase employment opportunities for VR customers.

Recommendation is to add as a strategy reporting the increase of the number of employers the business relations department has made contact/communicated during the year, and the number of employers who have hired people with disabilities that were closed during the year.

Response:

TWC-VR will confer with TWC's I|3 Division to determine how to use available data to measure the number of employers, statewide and by region, hiring VR participants, such as a cumulative measure on the number of unique employers (based on FEIN) served year-to-date. This measure will reflect the work of both the business relations team and counselors and other VR staff who regularly engage employers. Additionally, consistent with the WIOA accountability measure for

evaluating the workforce system's effectiveness in serving employers, TWC-VR will work with IJ3 to evaluate retention with the same employer, in which a VR participant who exits with employment is employed with the same employer in both the second and fourth quarters post-exit.

Recommendation 11:

3) Supported employment services

Extended services, known in Texas as long-term support and services, can be publicly funded, "natural" or "in-kind," or paid by the customer through Social Security Insurance (SSI), Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), or another Social Security Administration Title II work incentive program.

Recommendation: Please clarify or be more specific with what was intended with the statement that services would be paid for through Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or another Social Security Administration Title II work incentive program.

Response:

TWC-VR has added additional content to clarify the purpose of this statement and included additional resources that could potentially provide extended services.

Recommendation 12:

(f) Annual Estimates

Recommendation: The estimates for the next federal year appear to be lower than expected. The numbers provided to the RCT for the annual report as served for 2022 were 81,722 for general Vocational Rehabilitation alone. Recommend reviewing this category again.

Response:

Annual estimates listed in section (f), Annual Estimates, were calculated from the number of customers that were determined eligible in FY2022. The number of customers listed as served in FY 2022 in the annual report for RCT included customers from the point of their initial contact with VR, which occurs prior to the determination of eligibility and includes provision of information about VR, making a case assignment, and completing the application. This difference in methodology accounts for the variation in number identified by RCT.

Recommendation 13:

The VR agency's plan for recruitment, preparation and retention of qualified personnel

Recommendation: The salaries of jobs have increased after the pandemic as more and more fields are experiencing difficulties in finding staff. Increasing salary has been one method used by employers to attract staff. It has been reported

that a great number of counselor positions have been offered to individuals who have turned down the position due to the pay. It is recommended that TWC-VR make every effort to advocate for an increase in salary for counselors and field staff in an effort to increase hiring of staff. It will also make the position and the agency more desirable to come to work.

Response:

TWC-VR continues to review its salary structure and processes to enable increases in pay for VR staff, including those available through career ladder or other promotions and for meritorious performance. TWC-VR also established salary guidelines for all VR hiring managers to follow, ensuring that starting salaries are consistent and competitive with similar positions in the agency. These guidelines are reviewed each year to ensure they remain current. In addition, the 88th Texas Legislature passed a cost-of-living adjustment for all State of Texas employees, resulting in all employees receiving a 5% salary increase effective July 1, 2023, and an additional 5% increase that will be effective on September 1, 2024. TWC-VR continues to confer with VR Division managers and supervisors to determine where and how frequently potential candidates are turning down employment offers due to salary, and will consult with TWC Human Resources (HR) to identify additional strategies to reduce that frequency.

Recommendation 14:

The RCT has been in discussion with TWC-VR regarding VR Counselors who do not meet Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) requirements. RCT recommends a consideration for a specific strategy to award merits or promotions to VRCs who are at least one year on the job, meet performance measures (which can be defined in this strategy) but the employee does not meet the educational requirement/CSPD (by being enrolled in a Master's program) to be promoted to a VRC II and receive the compensation which accompanies the promotion. Potential alternatives that can be considered include;

- a. Remove the requirement for a VRC to be enrolled in a Qualified Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (QVRC) Master's program if they do not meet CSPD from the criteria for advancement from a VRC I to a VRCII. (the education requirement can be added to the criteria to promote from a VRCII to a VRC III).
- b. Allow the VRC I to promote to a VRC II but can only receive ½ of the 7 percent raise until they meet the educational requirement by being enrolled in a QVRC Master's program. Or only receive ½ of the 7 percent raise and remain a VRC I until enrolled in a QVRC program then the promotion to a VRC II can occur and the additional 3.5 raise can be earned.
- c. Enable the VRCI to be eligible for a one-time 5 percent merit which in many cases may provide the financial boost and motivation needed to be able to enroll in a QVRC Master's program. (REASON for suggestion) Many VRCs have life circumstances which prevent them from entering the QVRC program timely but they do outstanding work in a very hard job and they deserve compensation for their hard work. (short version)

Response:

TWC-VR will review RCT's recommendations regarding opportunities for a merit increase for those classified as a VRC I and will provide an update to RCT following completion of the review.

Recommendation 15:

(i) Comprehensive System of Personnel Development.

The projection of the number of Transition Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (TVRC) in the next five years is 177. RCT recommends the agency review this again as it is reported from Texas Education Agency (TEA) that there are 358,000 students in special education in the State of Texas. Based on the number of students in the state, it is a challenge to be able to serve all of the students that would potentially benefit from TWS-VRS services. Recommend the agency review the data and determine if this number should be increased.

Response:

Based on data reviewed by TWC-VR and IJ3, current projections reflect a continued increase in the number of students receiving pre-employment transition services and other VR services. Given the significant growth since FY 2017 in both the array and availability of pre-employment transitions services, TWC-VR is reviewing these services to identify where services can be enhanced, revised or expanded to serve more students, and what organizational and staff capacity changes may be necessary to meet anticipated growth. Updates to the projected number of TVRCs and VR counselors will be included in the mid-point modification of the Combined State Plan for Program Years 2024-2027, which will be developed in 2025.

Recommendation 16:

RCT recommends that applicants for vocational counselor positions who have experience as a VRC from this state or other states, with a master's degree, be allowed to be hired in at a level above a VRC I and be able to be paid at a higher rate taking into account their education and experience. It is felt this can increase the ability to hire people with experience in the field if they don't have to start at the lowest level when they have shown the experience and ability to perform at a higher level.

Response:

Current TWC-VR salary guidelines ensure a competitive starting salary based on education and experience. A counselor with prior education and experience can be hired as a VRC II – V as appropriate, however, starting as a VRC I gives counselors who are new to TWC VR an opportunity to both acclimate to agency policies and processes and provides additional opportunities for promotion and associated salary increases as the counselor moves up the VRC career ladder.

Recommendation 17:

RCT recommends in an effort to improve the number of providers in the state a position in each region be created to address this need or designate a position other than the counselor to address this need. The lack of providers and the time to seek out a provider is also a source of delay for customers. Having a system or designated staff to address this deficit can benefit the customer and counselor and allow timelier services.

Response:

Increasing the number of providers in specific geographic areas and statewide for certain VR services remains a priority for TWC-VR. A process is currently underway to determine the most effective and efficient strategies for provider recruitment, including both systems and staffing.

Recommendation 18:

Purchasing for customers is a challenge due to limited providers and lack of flexibility in being able to work with businesses to obtain services for customers. RCT recommends TWS-VRS look at means to purchase services through other methods than requiring the business to become a vendor with the agency.

Response:

State of Texas purchasing requirements include ensuring that every entity receiving payment from the State be set up as a vendor and in a manner that enables required reporting to and connection with systems maintained by the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts. In addition, federal regulations in 2 CFR 200.317, with which VR programs must comply, require VR to follow state requirements: “When procuring property and services under a Federal award, a State must follow the same policies and procedures it uses for procurements from its non-Federal funds.” TWC-VR will continue to review and improve internal processes for collaboration and communication with TWC’s vendor-set up department.



Measures of Success

Customer Satisfaction Survey

The following survey results describe satisfaction with VR services provided by TWC in State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2024. Surveys were completed by customers with an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) whose cases were closed as either successful (employed) or unsuccessful (not employed) the month prior to the survey. Percentages indicate customers who responded “yes” or those who answered “satisfied” or “very satisfied” and do not include data for survey responders who chose not to answer the question.

Customer Satisfaction Survey Result: All Disabilities (including both General and Visual Disabilities)

General disabilities include behavioral and mental health conditions; hearing impairments, including deafness; alcohol or drug addiction; intellectual, learning, and developmental disabilities; and physical disabilities, including traumatic brain and spinal cord injury, back injury, paralysis, and impaired movement. Visual disabilities include blindness, significant visual impairments, and deaf blindness.

I was treated in a friendly and respectful manner when I dealt with VR staff. (Question 1)	93%
I was satisfied with the amount of time it took for VR staff to respond to my emails, calls, or other contacts. (Question 2)	85%
I was satisfied with the information I received about VR services that may have helped me achieve my job goals. (Question 3)	87%
I was satisfied with how long it took to start services. (Question 4)	83%
I was satisfied with the support provided by VR Staff. (Question 5)	86%
I was satisfied with the continuation of services if my counselor changed, was absent, or had multiple counselors. (Question 6)	80%
Overall, I was satisfied with my VR counselor. (Question 7)	87%
Overall, I was satisfied with VR. (Question 8)	87%
I am working now. (Question 9)	74%
I am satisfied with my pay. (Question 10)	85%
I have employee benefits such as vacation, sick leave, and health insurance. (Question 11)	62%
I am satisfied with not having benefits. (Question 12)	48%
I am satisfied with my employee benefits (vacation, sick leave, health insurance). (Question 13)	93%
I am satisfied with options for growth in my job. (Question 14)	82%
Overall, I am satisfied with my job. (Question 15)	92%
I would come back to VR if I needed additional services to advance in my career or to maintain my current job. (Question 16)	85%

Customer Satisfaction Survey Results: Visual Disabilities

Visual disabilities include blindness, significant visual impairments, and deaf blindness.

I was treated in a friendly and respectful manner when I dealt with VR staff. (Question 1)	93%
I was satisfied with the amount of time it took for VR staff to respond to your emails, calls, or other contacts. (Question 2)	81%
I was satisfied with the information I received about VR services that may have helped me achieve my job goals. (Question 3)	82%
I was satisfied with how long it took to start services. (Question 4)	84%
I was satisfied with the support provided by VR Staff. (Question 5)	86%
I was satisfied with the continuation of services if my counselor changed, was absent, or had multiple counselors. (Question 6)	74%
Overall, I was satisfied with my VR counselor. (Question 7)	83%
Overall, I was satisfied with VR. (Question 8)	85%
I am working now. (Question 9)	63%
I am satisfied with my pay. (Question 10)	85%
I have employee benefits such as vacation, sick leave, and health insurance. (Question 11)	63%
I am satisfied with not having benefits. (Question 12)	36%
I am satisfied with my employee benefits (vacation, sick leave, health insurance). (Question 13)	91%
I am satisfied with options for growth in my job. (Question 14)	82%
Overall, I am satisfied with my job. (Question 15)	92%
I would come back to VR if I needed additional services to advance in my career or to maintain my current job. (Question 16)	83%

Statistics

Statistics: General Disabilities

The following statistics describe VR services for persons with general disabilities (other than vision impairment) provided in SFY 2024 by TWC. For age-related data, the customer's age reported at the start of the state fiscal year was used. General disabilities include behavioral and mental health conditions; hearing impairments, including deafness; alcohol or drug addiction; intellectual, learning, and developmental disabilities; and neurological and physical disabilities, including traumatic brain and spinal cord injury, back injury, paralysis, and impaired movement.

Total customers served, all ages*:	103,623
Total customers served under age 22**:	52,388
Total Pre-ETS Students Served***:	33,988

*"Customers Served" = from Initial Contact with Case Assignment forward

**Under the age of 22 as of September 1, 2023

***Students who are eligible or potentially eligible to receive Pre-employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS).

Percent Served by Gender

Total General VR Customers Served by Gender	Customers, All Ages	Percent of Customers, All Ages	Customers, Under Age 22	Percent of Customers, Under Age 22
Female	34,656	45.0%	10,020	38.8%
Male	42,029	54.5%	15,659	60.6%
Did not self-identify	401	0.5%	172	0.7%
Total	77,086	100%	25,851	100%

Race/Ethnicity of General Disabilities Served

Race/Ethnicity	Total General VR Customer Responses	Percent General VR Customers Served
Non-Hispanic African American	25,348	24.5%
Non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaskan	811	0.8%
Non-Hispanic Asian	2,563	2.5%
Non-Hispanic Pacific Islander	363	0.4%
Non-Hispanic White	39,549	38.2%
Not Reported/Unavailable	-	0.0%
Hispanic	34,989	33.8%
Total	103,623	100%

SSI/SSDI Information

SSI/SSDI Information	Total General VR Customers Served	Percent General VR Customers Served	Total General VR Successful Closures	Percent General VR Successful Closures
SSI/SSDI at Application	7,186	6.9%	794	8.5%
SSI/SSDI During Case (at App, Current, or Close)	15,511	15.0%	1,213	13.0%
SSI/SSDI at Closure	Not Applicable	Not Applicable	897	9.6%

Percent Expenditure by Service Type

Expenditures by Service Category	All Ages	Under 22
Academic and Vocational Training	28.8%	37.3%
All Other Goods and Services	1.6%	0.6%
Assistive Technology, Including Evaluation and Training	6.0%	1.1%
Computers and Related Equipment	0.7%	0.6%
Diagnostics and Evaluation	7.8%	3.2%
Hearing Aids and Interpretive Services	13.9%	1.2%
Job Placement Services	3.9%	2.4%
Maintenance and Transportation	1.5%	0.9%
Medical Services	3.8%	0.2%
Pre-employment Transition Services	13.3%	28.2%
Prosthetics and Orthotics	1.9%	0.1%
Room and Board (Academic/Vocational Training)	11.6%	20.2%
Supported Employment Services	5.2%	4.0%
Total	100%	100%

* Amounts do not include expenditures that are not associated with a specific case. Age is based on age at start of the state fiscal year.

This table contains General case expenditures (service authorization payments) included in ReHabWorks that are associated with a specific case and is not inclusive of other client services expenditures routed through the purchase order processes (such as Pre-ETS Statewide Initiatives) in the agency's accounting system. The TWC Finance Division reports Combined VR expenditures, which includes both General and Blind cases. Total Combined case service expenditures across all service categories and populations is \$187,182,794 (per TWC Finance; data as of September 30, 2024).

“Medical Services” includes Surgery and Hospitalization and Restoration Services. “All Other Goods and Services” includes Diabetes Education, Benefits Counseling, Miscellaneous, Other Services for Family Members, Childcare, State License Fees, Uniform Items for Employment, Employment Goods and Equipment–Non Consumable, Self-Employment Goods and Equipment Non Consumable, Other Rehab Tech Services, Other Personal Attendant Services, Translator for Limited English Proficiency, Self-Employment Services, and Halfway House Services–CRP.

Disabilities Served

Primary Disability	% of Customers, All Ages	% of Customers, Under Age 22
Cardiac/Respiratory/Circulatory	2.60%	0.60%
Deaf & Hard of Hearing	17.15%	5.29%
Mental/Emotional/Psychosocial	17.49%	10.95%
Neurodevelopmental Disorders	37.16%	73.86%
Neurological/Musculoskeletal/Orthopedic	17.30%	6.96%
Other Impairments	0.23%	0.26%
Other Physical Debilitation or Impairments	5.15%	1.34%
Substance Abuse	0.86%	0.04%
Traumatic Brain Injury/Spinal Cord Injury	2.05%	0.70%
Total	100%	100%

* Disability type is unavailable for most customers prior to the eligibility determination phase.

Successful Closures

Total successful closures, All Ages:	9,296
Total successful closures under age 22:	1,108

Percent Successful Closures Served by Gender

Successful General VR Closures by Gender	Successful Closures, All Ages	Percent of Successful Closures, All Ages	Successful Closures, Under Age 22	Percent of Successful Closures, Under Age 22
Female	4,274	46.0%	344	31.0%
Male	4,991	53.7%	760	68.6%
Did not self-identify	31	0.3%	4	0.4%
Total	9,296	100%	1,108	100%



Percent of Successful Closures by Occupation

Successful Closures by Occupation	Successful General VR Closures, All Ages	Percent of General VR Successful Closures, All Ages	Successful General VR Closures, Under Age 22	Percent of General VR Successful Closures, Under Age 22
All Other Occupations	23	0.2%	< 5	*
Computer, Engineering, and Science	298	3.2%	14	1.3%
Construction and Extraction	264	2.8%	13	1.2%
Education, Legal, Community Service, Arts, and Media	1,076	11.6%	37	3.3%
Healthcare Practitioners, Technical, and Healthcare Support	803	8.6%	52	4.7%
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	361	3.9%	57	5.2%
Management, Business, and Financial	803	8.6%	17	1.5%
Office and Administrative Support	1,479	16.0%	153	13.8%
Production Occupations	369	4.0%	66	6.0%
Sales and Related Occupations	547	5.9%	71	6.4%
Service Occupations	1,835	19.7%	368	33.3%
Transportation and Material Moving	1,438	15.5%	257	23.3%

*Counts less than five are masked.

This table contains customers who have achieved an employment outcome as described in their IPE, maintained employment for 90 days after substantial services are completed, and are employed at closure. “All Other Occupations” includes Farming, Fishing, Forestry, and Military Specific Occupations.



Statistics: Visual Disabilities

The following statistics describe VR services for persons with visual disabilities provided in SFY 2024. For age-related data, age reported at the start of the fiscal year was used. Visual disabilities include blindness, significant visual impairments, and deaf blindness.

Total Customers Served, All Ages*:	9,482
Total Customers Served, Under Age 22**:	1,695
Total Pre-ETS Students Served***:	1,685

*"Customers Served" = from Initial Contact with Case Assignment forward

**Under the age of 22 as of September 1, 2023

***Students who are eligible or potentially eligible to receive Pre-employment Transition Services.

Percent Served by Gender

Total Blind VR Customers Served by Gender	Customers, All Ages	Percent of Customers, All Ages	Customers, Under Age 22	Percent of Customers, Under Age 22
Female	4,156	49.4%	799	47.1%
Male	4,234	50.3%	885	52.2%
Did not self-identify	29	0.3%	11	0.6%
Total	8,419	100%	1,695	100%

Race/Ethnicity of Blind VR Customers Served

Race/Ethnicity	Total Blind VR Customer Responses	Percent Blind VR Customers Served
Non-Hispanic African American	2,220	23.4%
Non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaskan	58	0.6%
Non-Hispanic Asian	280	3.0%
Non-Hispanic Pacific Islander	32	0.3%
Non-Hispanic White	3,069	32.4%
Not Reported/Unavailable	141	1.5%
Hispanic	3,682	38.8%
Total	9,482	100%

SSI/SSDI Information Blind

SSI/SSDI Information	Total Blind VR Customers Served	Percent Blind VR Customers Served	Total Blind VR Successful Closures	Percent Blind VR Successful Closures
SSI/SSDI at Application	1,467	15.5%	89	11.1%
SSI/SSDI During Case (at app, current, or close)	2,675	28.2%	136	17.0%
SSI/SSDI at Closure	Not Applicable	Not Applicable	114	14.2%

Percent Expenditure by Service Type

Expenditures by Service Category	All Ages	Under 22
Academic and Vocational Training	12.3%	22.9%
All Other Goods and Services	8.5%	1.3%
Assistive Technology, Including Evaluation and Training	30.9%	13.5%
Computers and Related Equipment	3.4%	3.1%
Diagnostics and Evaluation	7.8%	1.4%
Eyeglasses, Lenses, Low-Vision Devices, Orthotics/Prosthetics	7.7%	2.0%
Job Placement Services	1.1%	0.4%
Maintenance and Transportation	3.0%	1.0%
Medical Services	0.8%	0.0%
Orientation and Mobility Training	2.4%	0.3%
Pre-employment Transition Services	10.9%	30.1%
Room and Board (Academic/Vocational Training)	10.0%	23.3%
Supported Employment Services	1.2%	0.7%
Total	100%	100%

* Amounts do not include expenditures that are not associated with a specific case. Age is based on age at start of the state fiscal year.

This table contains Blind VR case expenditures (service authorization payments) included in ReHabWorks that are associated with a specific case and is not inclusive of other client services expenditures routed through the purchase order processes (such as Pre-ETS Statewide Initiatives) in the agency's accounting system. The TWC Finance Division reports Combined VR expenditures, which includes both General and Blind cases. Total Combined case service expenditures across all service categories and populations is \$187,182,794 (per TWC Finance; data as of September 30, 2024).

"Medical Services" includes Surgery and Hospitalization and Restoration Services. "All Other Goods and Services" includes Diabetes Education, Benefits Counseling, Miscellaneous, Other Services for Family Members, Child Care, State License Fees, Uniform Items for Employment, Employment Goods and Equipment–Non Consumable, Self-Employment Goods and Non Consumable, Other Rehab Tech Services, Other Personal Attendant Services, Translator for Limited English Proficiency, Self-Employment Services, and Halfway House Services–CRP.

Successful Closures

Total Successful Closures:	801
Total Successful Closures, Under Age 22:	43

Percent Successful Closures by Gender

Successful Blind VR Closures by Gender	Successful Closures, All Ages	Percent of Successful Closures, All Ages	Successful Closures, Under Age 22	Percent of Successful Closures, Under Age 22
Female	388	48.4%	20	46.5%
Male	412	51.4%	23	53.5%
Did not self-identify	1	0.1%	0	0.0%
Total	801	100%	43	100%

Percent of Successful Closures by Occupation

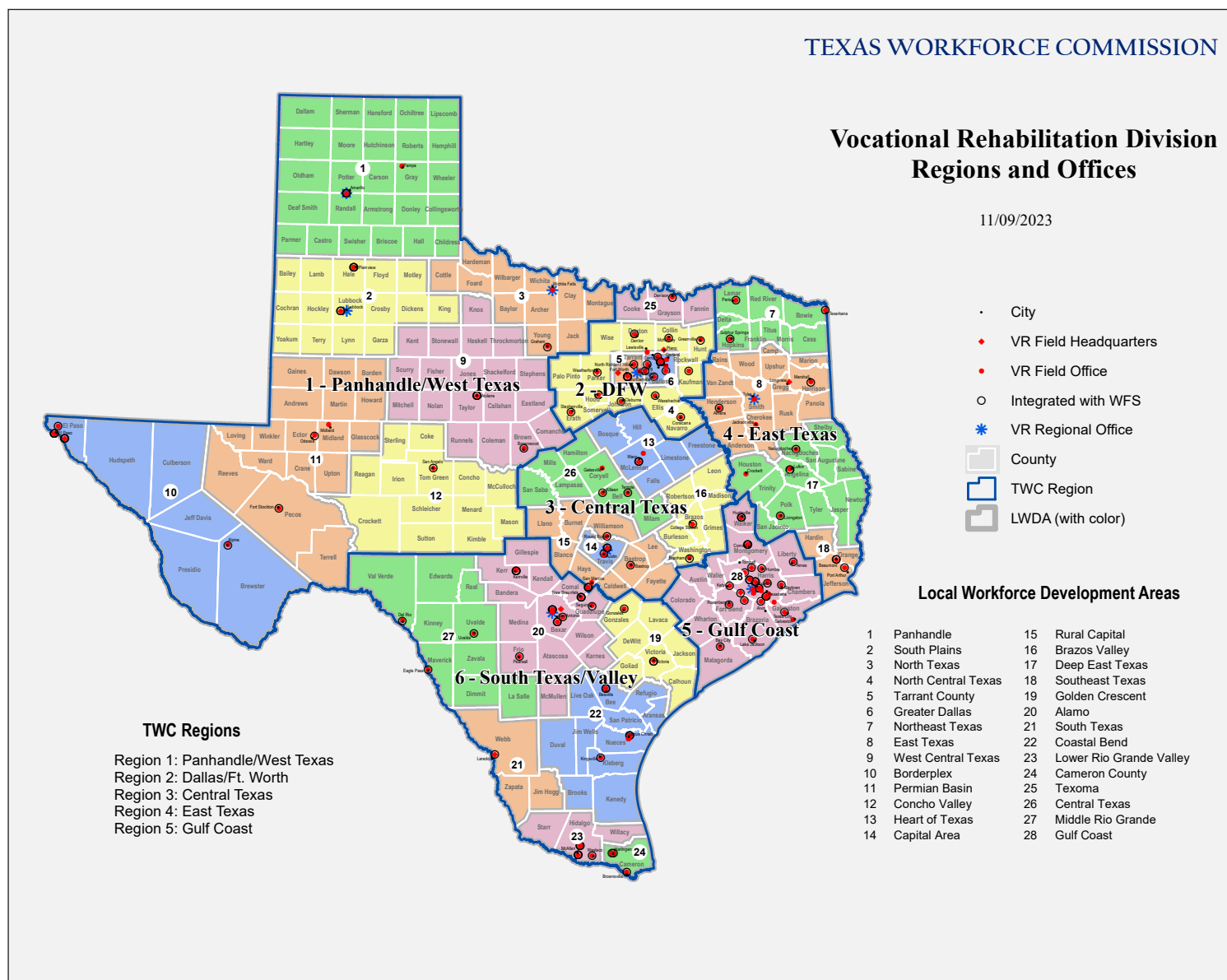
Total Blind VR Customers Served by Gender	Customers, All Ages	Percent of Customers, All Ages	Customers, Under Age 22	Percent of Customers, Under Age 22
All Other Occupations	11	1.4%	0	0.0%
Computer, Engineering, and Science	27	3.4%	< 5	*
Construction and Extraction	45	5.6%	< 5	*
Education, Legal, Community Service, Arts, and Media	117	14.6%	< 5	*
Healthcare Practitioners, Technical, and Healthcare Support	71	8.9%	< 5	*
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	30	3.7%	< 5	*
Management, Business, and Financial	77	9.6%	< 5	*
Office and Administrative Support	135	16.9%	7	16.3%
Production Occupations	26	3.2%	< 5	*
Sales and Related Occupations	56	7.0%	7	16.3%
Service Occupations	140	17.5%	12	27.9%
Transportation and Material Moving	66	8.2%	< 5	*

*Counts less than five are masked.

This table contains customers who have achieved an employment outcome as described in their IPE, maintained employment for 90 days after substantial services are completed, and are employed at closure. "All Other Occupations" includes Farming, Fishing, Forestry, and Randolph-Sheppard Vending Facility Operators.

TWC FY 2024 VR Budget	\$348,907,496
FY 2024 VR Client Services Budget	\$214,477,582

TWC VR Division Regions and Offices Map



To locate your TWC VR office:

Call: (512) 936-6400

Email: vr.office.locator@twc.state.tx.us

Visit online: www.twc.texas.gov/VRNearMe

Success Stories

Texas Takes Home 15 Awards for Excellence at Project SEARCH National Conference

Texas won big at the Project SEARCH National Conference held in summer 2024. Fifteen of the state's 30 Project SEARCH sites took home awards for excellence for the 2022–2023 school year. Two of those had perfect outcomes of 100 percent employment for all program participants.

These awards represent the ongoing commitment of each exemplary employer in hosting students year-round, providing them the opportunity to gain valuable employment skills in a supportive environment.

It is also a testament to the hundreds of partners that make these successful outcomes possible, including businesses, independent school districts, employment providers, parents, and guardians—all of whom partner with TWC's

VR program to champion our students along their journey. Project SEARCH sets the stage for success for students with disabilities who are ready to test their skills, grow as teammates, and build careers.



Support from VR Helps Set Wheels in Motion



Ricky Broussard, a dedicated peer support leader at Imagine Enterprises, transforms the lives of youth with disabilities through Pre-ETS. He contributes to teaching, coaching, and supporting youth with disabilities to learn skills and build self-determination skills. His ability to travel across seven school districts depends on owning a van with a lift, essential for his job security.

Thanks to VR, Ricky purchased a 2024 Toyota Sienna, customized with lift modifications, a safety lock, and six months of insurance and payments. With the help of VR Counselor Maghan Eugene-Johns and Assistive Technology Specialist Sara Hansel, Ricky secured his van and a sustainable

future. Ricky's success showcases the power of VR support in empowering independence.



Empowering Independence: New “People Planning Together” Training Launches for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Led by Jordan Smelley

The RCT and TWC-VR proudly announce a new service for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) launching in spring 2024. The “People Planning Together” (PPT) training, in partnership with Better Lives LP, helps participants with IDD set goals and develop action plans.

Jordan Smelley, a VR customer and RCT member, played a key role in making this partnership possible. With VR support, Jordan will soon be certified as a PPT trainer, empowering him to use his advocacy skills to help others with disabilities create meaningful, personalized plans.

From Vision Loss to Visionary: How AI and TWC’s VR Program Helped Kel Cates Soar in Roofing Restoration

At 31, Kel Cates, a former restaurant manager, was diagnosed with X-linked retinitis pigmentosa, a genetic disorder causing progressive vision loss. Despite earning a kinesiology degree and a teaching certificate, due to his worsening condition, Kel made the difficult decision to give up a career in teaching. Determined not to let his vision impairment define him, Kel sought help from VR services at TWC.

With support from VR services and his VR counselor Alicia Milliard, Kel transitioned to roofing restoration. Priority Roofing in Tyler, recognizing Kel’s potential, offered him a position as a restoration specialist, allowing him to use his skills and contribute meaningfully. However, his vision made identifying hail damage on roofs a significant challenge.

This obstacle was overcome with the introduction of Roof Hawk AI, a groundbreaking drone software that leverages AI technology to identify hail damage more efficiently and accurately. With the help of TWC, Kel purchased a DJI drone, allowing him to utilize Roof Hawk AI and perform his work safely and efficiently.

Kel overcame his vision limitations to identify hail damage. His journey reflects resilience, showing how technology and community support can open doors to new opportunities.



From Overcoming Odds to Austin PBS: Katie Amatangelo's Inspiring VR Journey

Katie Amatangelo's VR journey is a remarkable story of persistence and growth. Born prematurely at just one pound, Katie faced numerous challenges, including autism and sensory overload. At 29, with the help of the TWC's VR services, she is making strides toward competitive integrated employment.

A pivotal part of Katie's progress came through a VR service called Work Experience, which provides paid or unpaid internships. Her VR counselor, Robyn Farris, helped place Katie in her first-ever paid internship with Phalanx Outreach Solutions, where she interviewed 12 successful professionals, including renowned Austin news anchor Judy Maggio. This opportunity built up Katie's confidence, skills, and network.

Katie's success didn't come easy—her VR case has been open for 3.5 years. However, with adaptive driver's training, assistive technology, and a master's in fine arts (maintaining a 4.0 GPA), she is steadily progressing. Recently, she secured a prestigious 14-week paid internship with Austin PBS, where she earns \$20/hour. Now balancing work and school, she's learning to advocate for accommodations, meet deadlines, and work with others.

Katie's transformation—from avoiding new challenges to embracing public presentations—shows the incredible impact of VR services in helping individuals achieve their potential. The sky's the limit for Katie!



From VR Customer to NASA Leader: Cornelius Booker's Journey of Accessibility and Empowerment

Cornelius Booker's VR journey has come full circle. Once a customer of TWC's VR services, Cornelius now serves as a key partner and Equal Opportunity Officer at JSC/NASA. His career began with a decade as a regional disability navigator at Workforce Solutions, where he championed accessibility for underserved communities, helping people with disabilities gain access to essential resources.

Cornelius understands that true accessibility goes beyond ramps and automatic doors. It encompasses transportation, education, job opportunities, and mental health services—creating a path for individuals to thrive. His dedication to opening doors for others is deeply rooted in his own VR experience.

At a RCT meeting in November 2023, Cornelius participated in an employer panel, sharing his insights on disability inclusion. His story highlights the power of VR in helping individuals overcome obstacles, build careers, and give back to their communities.

Through his work and partnership with TWC-VR, Cornelius continues to inspire, demonstrating that with the right support, individuals with disabilities can access meaningful employment and opportunities for growth.

Tommy Hughes: A Rising Star in City Planning, Supported by Vocational Rehabilitation

Thomas “Tommy” Hughes is a shining example of determination and focus, making his mark with the support of TWC-VR program. After graduating high school in 2021, Tommy wasted no time, diving straight into college that fall with a passion for geographical information systems, transportation, and city planning.

Now in his senior year at the University of St. Thomas, Tommy has consistently maintained a GPA above 3.50—a testament to his hard work and dedication. As he looks ahead, Tommy is already planning his next steps, whether advancing his education or launching his career in his field of choice.

TWC-VR has supported Tommy on his academic journey, ensuring he has the tools and resources to succeed. With his drive and the backing of VR services, Tommy is poised for a future full of exciting opportunities. The sky’s the limit for this rising star, and the TWC-VR staff is thrilled to see what incredible achievements lie ahead for him!



From Uncertainty to Empowerment: Amanda’s Inspiring Journey Through Vocational Rehabilitation



Amanda Martinez walked into the TWC office with nerves on edge. A new transition student, she felt lost and uncertain, unsure of the path ahead. The fluorescent lights seemed harsh, amplifying her anxiety. Her counselor, Jennifer McCurley, greeted her with warmth and optimism, but Amanda was hesitant, a quiet figure reluctant to open up.

Jennifer persisted with gentle encouragement, and over time, Amanda began to trust the process. She applied for VR services, and when she was accepted into Project SEARCH, a year-long internship program for young adults with disabilities, Amanda’s outlook shifted. The future, once blurry, started to come into focus.

Through VR and Pre-ETS services, Amanda blossomed. She learned essential life skills, like advocating for herself, navigating the workplace, and even driving. Her first internship rotation in patient transport at Christus Trinity Mother Frances Hospital was nerve-wracking, but she adapted quickly.

Then, in the hospital's linen department, Amanda found an unexpected sense of calm and satisfaction. Her work led to a permanent position as a linen technician in May 2024. Now, Amanda thrives in her job, radiating confidence, pride, and accomplishment—a true testament to the power of VR services and a little encouragement.

From Tragedy to Triumph: How Vocational Rehabilitation Helped Justin Collier Reclaim His Life After a Spinal Cord Injury



On September 5, 2009, a single moment changed my life forever. A dive into Cedar Creek Lake left me with a C5 spinal cord injury and my future suddenly uncertain. In the ICU, amidst pain and fear, I met Mike Vinson, a VRC under the former Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS). Mike's optimism and explanation of VR services gave me a glimmer of hope. With Mike's support, I began VR services at Baylor Institute, where I slowly reclaimed my independence. They provided therapy and essential equipment like a wheelchair and standing frame, which empowered me to live more freely.

Returning home, I struggled to find purpose. Mike introduced me to Eric Mills, a VRC who had faced similar challenges. His story inspired me to pursue a degree in rehabilitation studies, with the dream of helping others like me. I studied at TVCC and then UNT, earning my degree in 2016.

Through various jobs, I worked toward my goal, and in July 2020, I achieved it by becoming a VRC at TWC. My journey from despair to empowerment illustrates the power of VR and the strength of the human spirit. It's a story of resilience, transformation, and the belief that second chances can lead to a brighter future.

Perseverance and Partnership: Visually Impaired Farmer Clinon Kyle Launches Beaumont's First High Tunnel Organic Farm

After years of perseverance, Clinon Kyle, a visually impaired farmer, has turned his dream of sustainable farming into reality with the launch of his own business, AEU Urban Farming, LLC,

Specializing in high tunnel organic farming, Clinon cultivates a diverse selection of crops, including tomatoes, spinach, bell peppers, cucumbers, various greens, strawberries, squash, melons, okra, beans, peas, and cantaloupe. His plans to provide the Beaumont community with fresh, locally grown produce year-round.

Clinon's journey began with a desire to establish himself as an independent entrepreneur, a goal he reached through collaboration with the Texas Workforce Solutions-Vocational Rehabilitation Services (TWS-VRS) and dedicated support from the Client Assistance Program.

"It's been a journey," Clinon said. "I'm a one-man band – doing everything from marketing to planting. I hope that as my business grows, I'll be able to bring someone on board."

Working closely with his TWS-VRS counselor Timothy Chargois, Clinon overcame significant hurdles. The team provided essential training, business planning guidance, and adaptive technology to help him navigate the unique challenges he faced as a visually impaired entrepreneur.

"My plan is to work with local grocers, and I'm even in talks with HEB," he added. "I think I might be the first high tunnel farmer in Beaumont!"



Clinon, diagnosed with glaucoma over 20 years ago, has proven resilient in his path. Reflecting on his experience, he advised, "If you weren't born with a disability, the first step is to regain your confidence. Once you have that, you can do anything."

Through his dedication, Clinon's story serves as an inspiration, underscoring the potential of Vocational Rehabilitation to empower individuals with disabilities to achieve self-sufficiency and success.

Membership and Meetings

Members



Gennadiy Goldenshteyn
RCT Chairman
Business, Industry and
Labor Representative
Dallas, TX



Peggy Schmidt
RCT Vice Chairman
Community Rehabilitation Program
Representative
Lucas, TX



Mark Baird
State VR Counselor
Representative
San Angelo, TX



Glenda J. Born
Disability Representative
Austin, TX



Jennifer Clouse
Business, Industry and
Labor Representative
Temple, TX



Lisa Cowart
Parent Training & Information
Representative
Sour Lake, TX



Cheryl Fuller
State VR Director
Representative
Austin, TX



Norine J. Gill
Business, Industry, and
Labor Representative
LaPorte, TX



Michele L. Harper
State Workforce
Investment Board
Representative
San Marcos, TX



Emily Heise
State Education Agency
Representative
Lorena, TX



Kiffany D. Jefferson
Disability Representative
Rowlett, TX



Michele L. Norris
State VR Counselor
Representative
La Porte, TX



Joe Powell
Disability
Representative
Irving, TX



Jordon Smelley
Disability
Representative
Burleson, TX



Daniel W. Solcher
Business, Industry, and
Labor Representative
Allen, TX



Karen Stanfill
Client Assistance Program
Representative
Houston, TX



Patrick Sturdivant
State Independent Living
Council Representative
Houston, TX



Lisa Godwin
RCT Coordinator
Surfside Beach, TX

Become a Member

If you are an individual with a disability or someone interested in providing input on VR services for Texans with disabilities, the RCT may be for you. Interested individuals must submit an application to the Texas governor. Council members are appointed by the governor for three-year terms and represent a diverse range of disabilities and community perspectives. RCT must include representatives from the state's designated VR program, the State Independent Living Council, community rehabilitation programs, other disability organizations and programs, and individuals with disabilities and their family members or authorized representatives. Business, Industry, and Labor representatives, and those from the State Workforce Investment Board and Texas Education Agency, are also required.

2025 Rehabilitation Council of Texas Quarterly Meeting Schedule

RCT members convene for quarterly meetings to participate in discussion panels, presentations, and committee meetings in support of the RCT's mission, values, and responsibilities.

Times and locations are subject to change. For current information visit the website at:



www.src-texas.org

Tentative 2025 Quarterly Meeting Schedule

October 31–November 1, 2024

February 6–7, 2025

May 1–2, 2025

August 7–8, 2025



101 East 15th Street
Austin, Texas 78778-0001
512-463-2222
twc.texas.gov

Equal Opportunity Employer/Program. Auxiliary aids and services are available upon request to individuals with disabilities. Relay Texas: 800-735-2989 (TTY) and 711 (Voice).