

Board of Vocational Rehabilitation Services

South Dakota's State Rehabilitation Council

2025 Annual Report



Department of Human Services
Division of Rehabilitation Services

South Dakota



Vocational
Rehabilitation

From Obstacles
To Opportunities

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)
A program that assists people with disabilities to prepare for, secure, retain, or regain employment.

Letter from the Board of Vocational Rehabilitation Chairperson

Governor Larry Rhoden
Office of the Governor
500 East Capitol Avenue
Pierre, SD 57501

Christopher Pope
Director, State Monitoring and Program Improvement Division
Rehabilitation Services Administration
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Governor Rhoden and Director Pope,

On behalf of the Board of Vocational Rehabilitation, South Dakota's State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), I am pleased to present the 2025 Annual Report.

The Board continues to partner closely with the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) to ensure that the voices and needs of the disability community remain central to service delivery and decision-making.

This report highlights the dedication of Division staff, Board members, and partners in supporting individuals with disabilities in achieving their employment goals. It includes key activities and accomplishments from the past program year, as well as photos of the 2025 Governor's Awards recipients - showcasing the resilience and determination of South Dakotans striving for independence.

The Board remains committed to working with the Division to expand opportunities and improve outcomes for individuals with disabilities across South Dakota.

Respectfully,

Jonathan Englund

Jonathan Englund
Chairperson

CC: Board Members
Joseph Doney, RSA State Liaison (Email Copy)
Jason Hunter, RSA's SRC Liaison (Email Copy)

About the Board of Vocational Rehabilitation

The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) is known in South Dakota as the Board of Vocational Rehabilitation (BVR). The BVR collaborates with the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) in administering the vocational rehabilitation (VR) program. Among its responsibilities, the Board reviews, evaluates, and advises the VR agency regarding its performance and effectiveness in delivering services, including the effect of service provision on the achievement of employment outcomes by individuals with disabilities.

Board composition and responsibilities are specified in Section 105 of the Rehabilitation Act and 34 CFR Sections 361.16 and 361.17. A majority of Board members must be individuals with disabilities who meet federal requirements and are not employed by the VR agency. The Governor appoints all Board members.

The Board seeks input from individuals with disabilities, community advocates, business and industry leaders, and disability groups, as agencies develop and implement policies and procedures that directly impact individuals served by VR.

VR services are designed to support individuals with disabilities to reach their career goals in successful integrated employment in communities throughout South Dakota.

Board Membership

Cole Uecker, Pierre
Betsy Drew, Sioux Falls
Chris Olson, Sioux Falls
Jennifer Trenhaile, Yankton
Sherry Van Liere, Wentworth
Eric Weiss, Pierre
Shawn Lyons, Pierre
Julie Johnson, Aberdeen

Eric Larson, Menno
Jolleen Laverdure, Lower Brule
Vicki Stewart, Sioux Falls
Jonathan Englund, Piedmont
Michael Kokesh, Sioux Falls
Kara Schweitzer, Sioux Falls
Tana Zwart, Sioux Falls

Quarterly Meetings

November 25, 2024

March 12, 2025

June 26, 2025

September 3, 2025

Board related information can be found on South Dakota's Boards and Commissions portal, located at <https://boardsandcommissions.sd.gov/>.

Board Meetings

The Board held four quarterly meetings during the Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) time period of October 1, 2024 – September 30, 2025. All meetings were held in compliance with federal and state open meeting laws. A “public comment” period was incorporated into each meeting agenda. The meeting dates were determined by the Board; and meeting related information was posted to the Boards and Commission’s portal.

The Board conducted its meetings utilizing ZOOM which provided multiple means of access (computer, phone, support for closed captioning). A physical location was also offered for individuals to attend in person who wanted to participate in the virtual meeting. The meetings were publicly announced, open and accessible to the public.

Each meeting contained standing agenda items such as the Director’s Report, Quarterly Data Updates, Vocational Rehabilitation Program Initiatives, Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) Report, and a Board Staff Report.

Functions of the Board

- ✓ Review, analyze, and advise the VR agency on the performance of their responsibilities related to eligibility and order of selection; the extent, scope, and effectiveness of vocational rehabilitation services; functions that affect the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving employment outcomes.
- ✓ Partner with the VR agency in developing goals and priorities and evaluating the effectiveness in obtaining these goals.
- ✓ Advise the VR agency in the vocational rehabilitation portion of the Unified State Plan.
- ✓ Conduct a review and analysis of consumer satisfaction.
- ✓ Submit this report and make it public.
- ✓ Coordinate activities with other named Councils within the state, to include the Statewide Independent Living Council.
- ✓ Perform other relevant functions that the Board determines appropriate and consistent with the purpose of the VR agency.

Board Business

The Board and its committees conducted business via Zoom during this reporting period. The continued use of virtual meetings has resulted in improved attendance and engagement. The Board was successful in continuing its mission and partnering with the Division. Throughout the program year, the Board provided valuable input and recommendations to strengthen service delivery, enhance collaboration, and improve outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Meeting Highlights & Activities

- ❖ The Board received an update on the Sioux Falls district office relocation. The new location will host 14–16 agencies, with private offices for DRS and SBVI counselors to maintain confidentiality. Staff coordinated with the city to add a nearby bus stop based on member feedback.
- ❖ The Board received quarterly updates on case services, including total applications, eligibilities, number of consumers served, and closed cases. Outreach efforts have led to a gradual increase since COVID.
- ❖ The Board received updates on Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) and student participation. Services include job exploration, work-based learning, post-secondary counseling, workplace readiness, and self-advocacy training. The November 2024 report showed steady quarterly growth since 2021, with a notable increase in students aged 16–18, particularly post-COVID.
- ❖ The Board received updates on the Division's Performance Measures. The Division exceeded negotiated levels in all areas except credential attainment. The credential attainment numbers are expected to increase over time, because it measures attainment after the individual exists the VR system.
- ❖ The Division reported successful obtainment of reallocation monies. The Division secured these funds because the state provided the necessary matching funds.
- ❖ The Board received updates on the Division's outreach campaign to raise awareness of the VR program. Key messaging, materials, and social media posts, including individual testimonials. Feedback from the Board was positive.
- ❖ Seven Board members attended the annual Fall Conference. Sessions included boundaries/relationships, successful student outcomes, neurodiversity at work, disclosure/communication techniques, job carving, navigating anxiety, exploring Lakota values, wellness strategies, job corps, and working dogs in the workplace.

- ❖ The Board received updates on VR program initiatives this period, including the rollout of a new payroll system for Project Skills students and participants in paid work experiences. A Division work group is gathering feedback and refining tools to ensure the system meets participant and program needs.
- ❖ The Board reviewed results of a targeted case file review conducted by Division staff, one of the program evaluation methods used to ensure ongoing compliance. Members expressed support for activities that improve outcomes for individuals receiving services.
- ❖ The Board received a presentation on Customized Employment (CE), highlighting the discovery process used to match individuals' skills, interests, and goals with suitable job opportunities through interest-based negotiation and strong employer engagement. The Board supports the Division's efforts to expand CE through ongoing training, mentor development, and a certification-based fee schedule for employment specialists.
- ❖ The Board reviewed and approved changes to their bylaws during the November meeting. The bylaws were reviewed and compared with the Rehabilitation Act, as amended; changes were minor (cleanup and clarification).
- ❖ The Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC), Board of Service to the Blind and Visually Impaired (B/SBVI) and the Board participated with the NDEAM Debriefing with local planners of the 2024 events. Eleven communities hosted events with an estimated 820 attendees. Discussions focused on successes, areas for improvement and strategies to enhance employer engagement.
- ❖ The Board and Statewide Independent Living Council conducted a statewide solicitation for nominations in January to fill upcoming vacancies. Information was forwarded to the Governor's office in April for review and consideration.
- ❖ The Division reported on its request for proposals for Summer Pre ETS programs, resulting in 13 approved agencies offering 25 programs. Four of the agencies are new, including two school districts and two educational cooperatives. The Board supports expanding efforts to serve youth with disabilities through career exploration, job readiness, self-advocacy, and independent living skills training.
- ❖ The Board received updates on the five Project SEARCH sites in the state. The program serves students with disabilities (ages 18–21) who have met high school requirements and have transition goals in their IPE. Students complete three internships with individualized support and job coaching. Since 2010, 307 students have participated, with an 87% employment rate. In 2024, students earned an average of \$14.74/hour and worked 26 hours weekly. Currently, 31 interns are enrolled across the five sites.

- ❖ Two Project SEARCH staff updated the Board on partner involvement (businesses, VR, schools) and current internship rotations. They highlighted students gaining job skills, coaching, and confidence. Staff also shared updates on next year's planning, including application reviews, interviews, and expanded rotations.
- ❖ The Board reviewed and approved a funding request to host an educational event in Sioux Falls to highlight the importance of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the history of the disability movement. The audience included community members, people with disabilities, businesses, and organizations.
- ❖ The Board, SILC and B/SBVI approved financial support for the planned activities for the 2024 National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM).
- ❖ The Board was introduced to the director of the Workplace Disability Network (WDN) and received updates on the organization's accomplishments, training initiatives, and awareness efforts. Members also learned of WDN's five-year goals.
- ❖ The Board learned about the Division's intent to host quarterly statewide virtual training opportunities for businesses. Participant surveys will be collected and reviewed with the Board to help guide future training content.
- ❖ The Board was updated on a peer mentoring program launched by the Division for newly hired vocational counselors. Feedback will be solicited from both mentors and mentees which will be reviewed with the Board and guide program improvement efforts.
- ❖ The Board received an update on the Youth Leadership Forum held in June, where thirty-nine students with disabilities participated as delegates. Older students and adults with disabilities served as team leaders, assistant team leaders, and mentors.
- ❖ The Division presented results from the annual and targeted case file reviews, identifying areas of improvement, consistency, and those needing further attention. These reviews support quality assurance, service enhancement, policy clarification, training needs, and best practice identification.
- ❖ A presentation on the Post-Secondary Outcomes Survey (Indicator 14) summarized 2023 graduate data, highlighting post-school engagement in college, employment, training, or lack of engagement.
- ❖ Officer elections were held during the June meeting. Two outgoing members were recognized for their dedicated service and contributions to the Board.

- ❖ The Division updated the Board on the progress with the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment. Further collaboration with the Board will focus on reviewing and integrating findings into the State Plan's goals and priorities.
- ❖ The Board received an update on the opening of the Sioux Falls One Stop office, now hosting 14 state departments. The Board expressed strong support for co-locating services to improve accessibility across areas such as social services, education, health, revenue, labor, public safety, and human services.
- ❖ A new member orientation was hosted by Board and Division staff, covering federal and state entities involved with the vocational rehabilitation agency, VR services, and board related information including composition, bylaws, functions, and the member manual.
- ❖ The Board conducted its annual review of South Dakota's Open Meetings Laws, referencing the informational brochure from the SD Attorney General's office.
- ❖ The Board and Division reviewed results from the VR Consumer Satisfaction Surveys, which included six surveys targeting various stages of the VR process. Areas scoring below 90% such as IPE development, informed choice, and use of consumer-friendly language will be examined for improvement.
- ❖ The Board received updates on the Division's performance indicators, noting consistent achievement or exceeding targets, while identifying areas for continued improvement.
- ❖ Staff from the Transition Services Liaison Project shared updates on past and upcoming events, technical assistance efforts, and youth development programs including the Youth Leadership Forum (YLF), Catch the College Wave, and Let's Talk Work. Activities also included collaboration with educators and providers through IEP workshops, indicator reviews, and the Summer Transition Institute.
- ❖ Division staff provided an overview of the Brookings District Office, including operations, staffing, counties served, and partnerships with community support providers. Members gained insight into the office's challenges and successes.
- ❖ The Division maintained its annual agreement with Black Hills Special Services Cooperative to provide staff support for the Board and SILC. The agreement was reviewed and renegotiated, and support staff was supervised and evaluated by Board and SILC leadership to ensure effective service delivery.

Summary of Board Input/Recommendations

- ✓ Provided recommendations on the selection of the Governor's Awards recipients.
- ✓ Reviewed and analyzed the Client Satisfaction Survey results.
- ✓ Approved financial support for the Governor's Awards Ceremony, NDEAM events, and an educational event to highlight the importance of the ADA and the history of the disability movement.
- ✓ Reviewed and approved changes to the Board's bylaws.
- ✓ Endorsed the Division's Outreach Campaign strategies and final deliverables.
- ✓ Endorsed strategies to increase awareness and access to VR services statewide.
- ✓ Endorsed services and activities that engage youth with disabilities to support their transition and career readiness.
- ✓ Continued support and investment in programs such as Project SEARCH and Summer Youth Programs to help the VR program meet its federal requirement to allocate 15% of funds to the provision of Pre Employment Transition Services (Pre ETS).
- ✓ Provided a copy of the annual report with the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Council in order for it to be shared on their website.
- ✓ Reviewed VR performance indicators and case file review findings and supported efforts to explore areas to improve consistency and clarity in service delivery.
- ✓ Continued active collaboration with the Division during the implementation of the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment to analyze findings which will be utilized to effectively integrate results into the State Plan's goals and strategies.

State Plan Goals

Goal 1. Implement strategies to increase awareness and access to services/resources.

Goal 2. Identify and support students and youth with disabilities with making informed choices for successful daily living and participation in education/training leading to career pathways through the provision of individualized services.

Goal 3. Provide services and supports to assist individuals with disabilities with making informed choices regarding employment, money management, and personal and work relationships, to live as independently as possible.

Goal 4. Facilitate the delivery of VR services to enhance earnings, employee benefits, retention, and career advancement for clients.

Goal 5. Facilitate the development of a strong statewide community partnering with workforce systems, businesses, State Government, tribal systems, service providers, and service organizations to enhance services to individuals with disabilities eligible for services.

Division of Rehabilitation Services

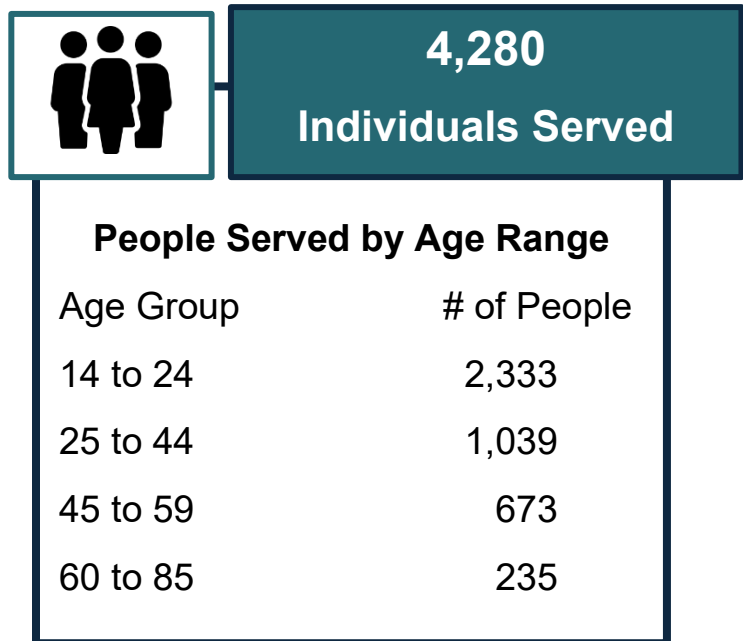
Program Year 2024 – July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025

A Year in Review

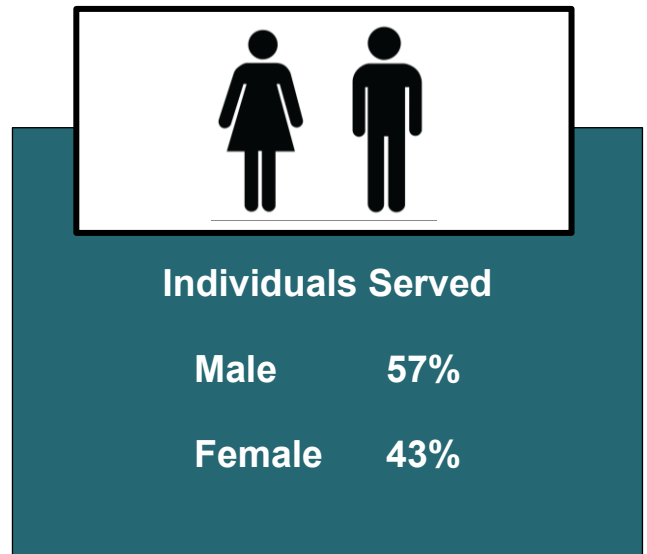
Who does the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) Serve?

DRS serves thousands of individuals with disabilities statewide by helping them reach their vocational goals. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services include the provision of individualized services to employers and people with disabilities, developing career pathways that link qualified employees to jobs, resulting in greater independence and more inclusive workplaces.

- A total of 1,945 applications were received for services, with 1,825 found eligible.
- A total of 4,280 people with disabilities received services.



- The average age of the person served was 33.5 years old.



- Average weekly earnings after rehabilitation were \$414.49.
- The average hours worked weekly: 25 hours/weekly.
- The average hourly wage was \$16.58.



Learn more about the Division at:
[Division of Rehabilitation Services](#)

Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS)

Referral Sources for the Vocational Rehabilitation Program

- ❖ Self-Referral, Friends, Family
- ❖ Elementary and Secondary Schools
- ❖ Other Sources (CILs, SSA, Medical Providers, Community Rehab Programs)
- ❖ Mental Health Providers
- ❖ Intellectual and Developmental Disability Agencies
- ❖ WIOA Title III

The SSA Status of Applicants Chart identifies the percentage of applicants who had social security benefits at the time of application (all individuals who applied for services between July 1, 2024, and June 30, 2025)

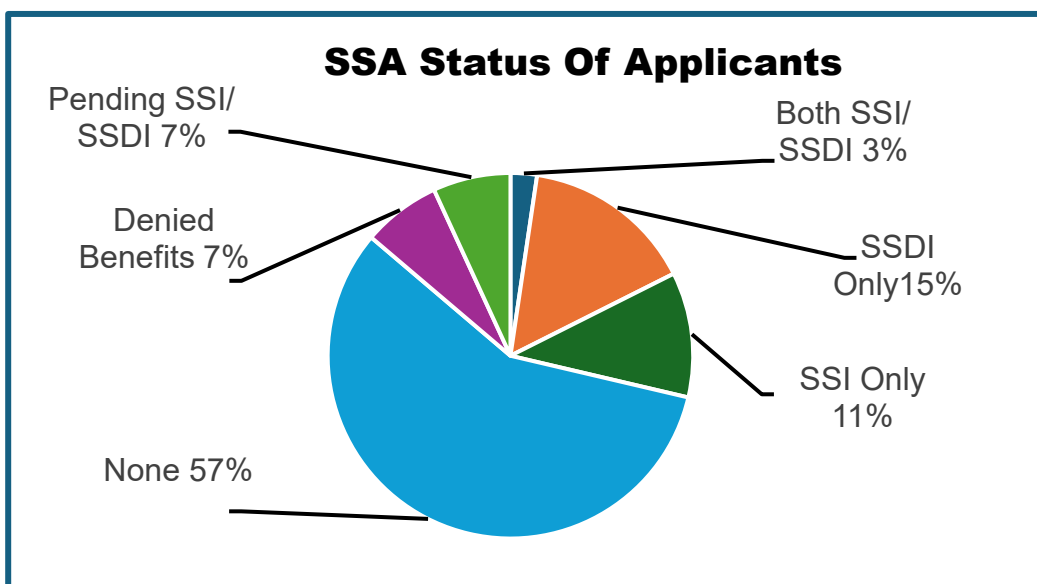


Chart information:

- 57% of Applicants had no benefits
- 15% of Applicants received SSDI
- 11% of Applicants received SSI
- 7% of Applicants pending SSI/SSDI status
- 7% of Applicants, had benefits denied
- 3% of Applicants received both SSI/SSDI

Largest Reported Barriers to Employment	Percent of Yes Responses on Initial IPE
Low Income	27%
No Barrier Identified	26%
Long Term Unemployment	17%
Basic Skills Deficient/Low Levels of Literacy	11%
Ex-offender	10%

Consumer Satisfaction Survey Results

The Division is responsible for reviewing and evaluating the effectiveness of its programs, while the Board is tasked with assessing the impact of VR services. To support this effort, four distinct surveys are distributed quarterly to a randomly selected group of participants. These surveys are sent via email and postcard, with an additional option for participants to respond by phone. The survey questions focus on key areas such as informed choice, satisfaction with services, and employment outcomes.

Indicator 3.1: This survey is distributed to participants six months after they begin their employment plan, with the goal of assessing their satisfaction with their involvement in both the planning and implementation of that plan.

There was a total of 3610 surveys disseminated with an 11% response rate. Results of data from July 1, 2024, through June 30, 2025, follow:

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree
VR counselor explained my options in choosing my employment goal.	57%	34%
VR counselor explained my choices to develop the IPE myself or receive assistance with developing my plan for employment.	54%	37%
VR counselor explained to me what services were available.	61%	32%
I was informed of my right to contact the Client Assistance Program for help in resolving differences and my right to appeal any disagreement.	56%	30%
Information was presented to me in an understandable manner.	58%	34%
I was a full partner in the decision-making process for my goal, employment plan, and choosing my services and provider.	63%	29%

Indicator 3.2: This survey is sent to participants who have been in the VR program for an extended period and have had the opportunity to utilize a variety of services. It aims to assess their satisfaction with the quality and appropriateness of the services received, as well as their interactions with service providers and VR program staff.

A total of 895 surveys were disseminated with a 14% response rate. Gathered responses include:

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree
I feel that the VR services in my plan will help me reach my employment goal.	59%	36%
Services from my VR counselor were provided in a timely manner.	63%	29%
The guidance and counseling received from my VR counselor have been helpful.	60%	35%
I would recommend the services to other people.	75%	23%
I am satisfied with the services I received from my service provider.	70%	27%
The services from my provider were accessible to me.	67%	31%

Indicator 3.3: This survey is sent to participants who have recently achieved a successful rehabilitation closure, with the purpose of evaluating their satisfaction with their employment outcome and overall experience in the VR program.

This survey had a 10% response rate with a total of 479 surveys disseminated. The survey gathered feedback on participants' satisfaction with their employment goal, wages, benefits, and whether they enjoy their workplace and coworkers. The results reflected the following:

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree
I am working in the field that I chose as my employment goal.	50%	39%
I am satisfied with the wages I receive.	43%	39%
I am satisfied with the employment I have because of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services	56%	37%
I am satisfied with the benefits I receive through my job.	47%	31%
I like the people and place where I am working.	62%	34%
I feel the services provided by VR helped me get my job.	55%	29%

Indicator 3.4: This survey is sent to participants whose cases were recently closed without successful employment, to assess their satisfaction with the services they received and their overall experience in the VR program.

The response rate with this survey was less than 7%. It was reported that this number is reflective of individuals who have moved, cannot be located, died, and other reasons.

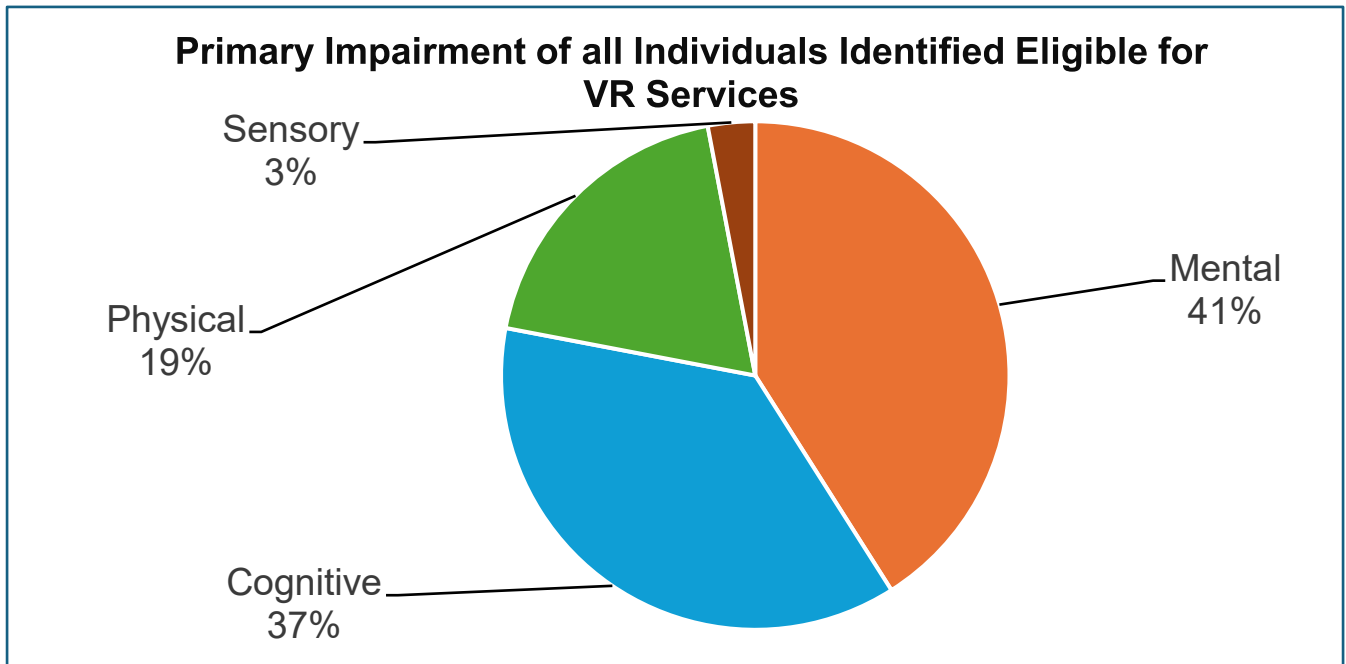
Question	Strongly Agree	Agree
My Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor understood my problems and needs.	51%	20%
My Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor gave me information about other programs that could help me.	44%	31%
I was aware of my right to contact the Client Assistance Program (CAP) for help to settle differences and appeal any disagreement with VR.	44%	41%
I would return to this Vocational Rehabilitation Program for additional services.	53%	19%

Indicator 3.4 Survey includes two optional open-ended questions, one which asks participants to identify a VR service they believe could have better supported their employment. Most responses fell under the "other" category, which included: participant moved out of state, chose to remain in their current job, or found employment on their own.

The second open-ended question asked participants to explain why they chose to stop receiving VR services. Common responses included: finding a job independently, feeling that VR services did not meet their needs, decline in health, or concerns that employment would impact their Social Security benefits. The two most frequently selected reasons, aside from those in the "other" category, were: "I found a job on my own" and "My health condition worsened."

Primary Impairment of Individuals Who Applied for VR Services

The chart below reflects the primary impairment or disability categories of individuals who applied for VR services and identified as eligible for services.



Pie Chart Indicates: Primary Impairment of Individuals Who Applied for VR services:

Mental Impairments 41%

Cognitive Impairments 37%

Physical impairments 19%

Sensory Impairments 3%

Disability/Impairment Categories include:

Cognitive Impairments: intellectual disabilities, specific learning disabilities, borderline intellectual functioning, ADHD, Autism, Congenital Condition or Birth Injury, TBI.

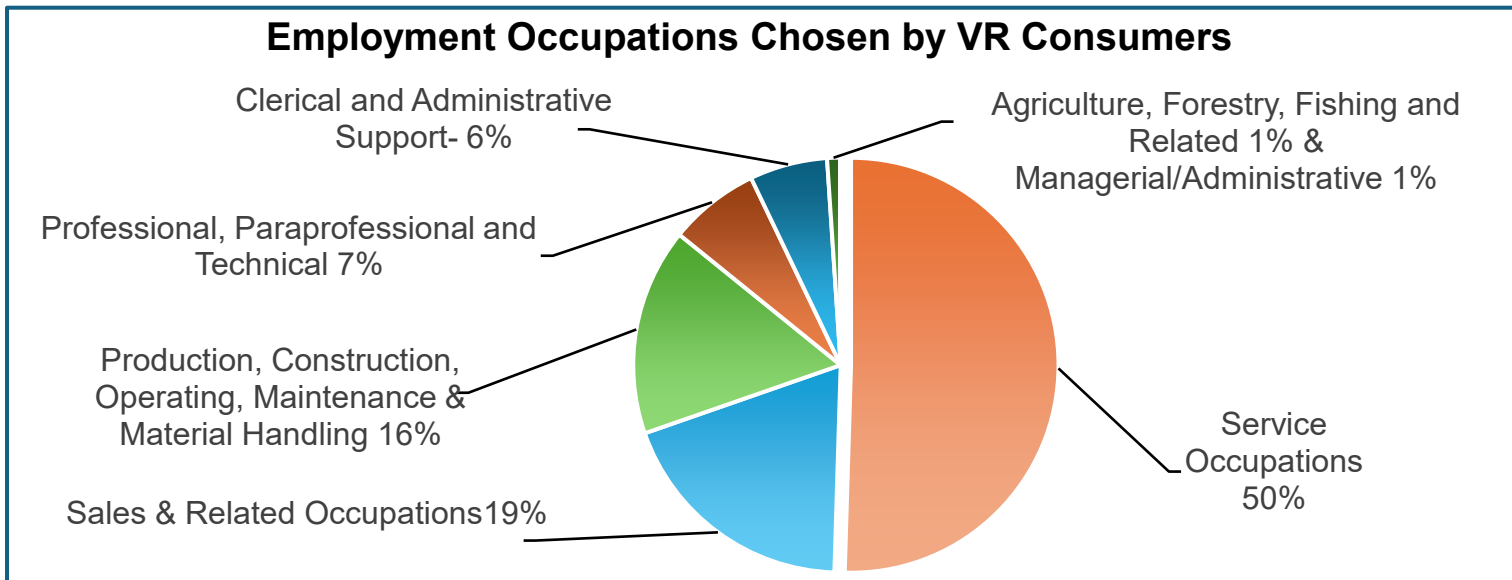
Mental Impairments: depression and other mood disorders, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders, personality disorders, Alcohol Abuse or Dependence, ADHD Arthritis and Rheumatism, Mental Illness not listed elsewhere.

Physical Impairments: Physical disorders/conditions not listed elsewhere, accident/injury (other than TBI), Arthritis and Rheumatism, cause unknown, epilepsy, diabetes mellitus, cerebral palsy, stroke.

Sensory Impairments: cause unknown, congenital condition or birth injury, Spinal Cord Injury (SCI), physical disorders/conditions not listed elsewhere, and stroke.

Occupational Categories of Individuals Achieving Employment

Types of employment occupations chosen by individuals served by the Division of Rehabilitation Service include:



Pie Chart Indicates: Employment Occupations Chosen by VR Consumers:

Service Occupations – 251

Sales & Related Occupations – 96

Production, Construction, Operating, Maintenance & Material Handling – 80

Professional, Paraprofessional and Technical – 33

Clerical and Administrative Support – 29

Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Related – 7

Managerial and Administrative – 2

The Division has eleven offices statewide, providing individualized services to individuals with significant disabilities to help them secure and maintain compatible employment. Those who receive VR services and achieve their employment goals report increased independence and reduced reliance on other support. The table below compares individuals' primary support at application and at closure.

Type of Support	Percentage at Application	Percentage at Closure
Personal Income	19%	68%
Public Support	31%	24%
Family and Friends	48%	8%
All other sources	2%	0%

Snapshot of Individuals Receiving Services

Race/Ethnicity of those who applied for VR services between July 1, 2024 -June 30, 2025

Race/Ethnicity of VR Applicants	Percent of Applicants
White	69%
American Indian or Alaska Native	15%
Two or more races/ethnicity	10%
Black or African American	5%
Did not self-Identify Race	1%

Medical Insurance – Another positive impact for individuals with disabilities who applied for VR Services

- ✓ The percentage of individuals with disabilities who applied for VR services with no insurance was 14%. This was reduced to 7% at the time of closure.
- ✓ Approximately 4% of individuals with disabilities had private insurance through an employer at the time they applied for VR services; those with private insurance at the time of closure increased to 18%.

Scope of VR Services:

Counseling and Guidance assists the individual to develop decision making and self-advocacy skills; to make career choices consistent with their identified strengths, resources, abilities, and environmental realities, and help the individual to better understand their disability, and exercise informed choice.

Employment: assist the individual to prepare for, gain, keep or advance in employment.

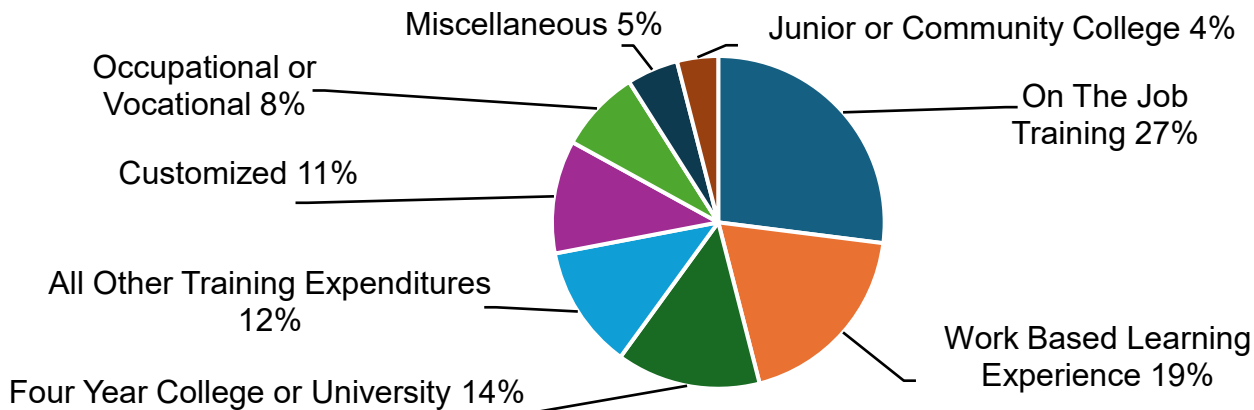
Accommodations: explore solutions for adaptive aids, technology, accessibility, and worksite assessments to assist in achieving the individual's employment goal.

Training: to assist with meeting the career goals through various options which may include on the job experiences, internships, job mentoring, job coaching and training.

Job Placement: assists the individual with resume writing skills, interview strategies, and job referrals.

Case Service Expenditures

All Training Expenditures by Category



Pie Chart Indicates: All Training Expenditures by Category

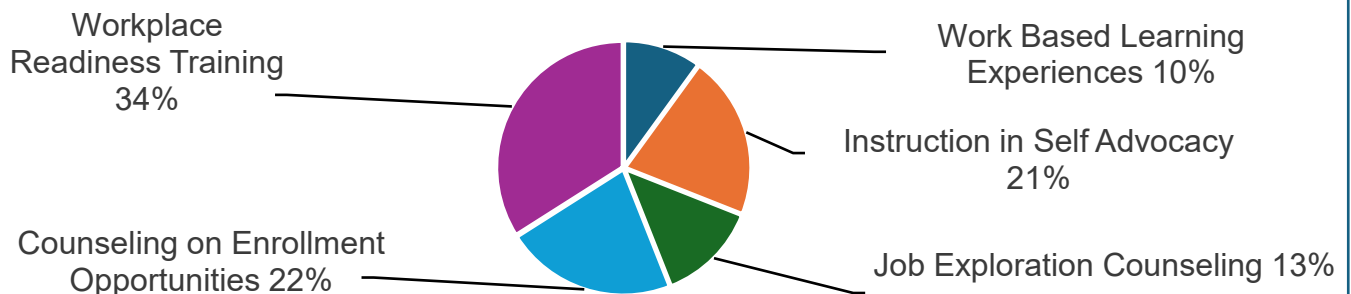
On The Job	27%
Work Based Learning Experience	19%
Four Year College or University	14%
All Other Training Expenditures	12%
Customized	11%
Occupational or Vocational	8%
Miscellaneous	5%
Junior or Community College	4%

Provision of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS): Pre-ETS can be provided directly by VR staff or purchased from a provider. The pie chart below shows those Pre-ETS provided by VR staff.

Pie Chart Indicates:

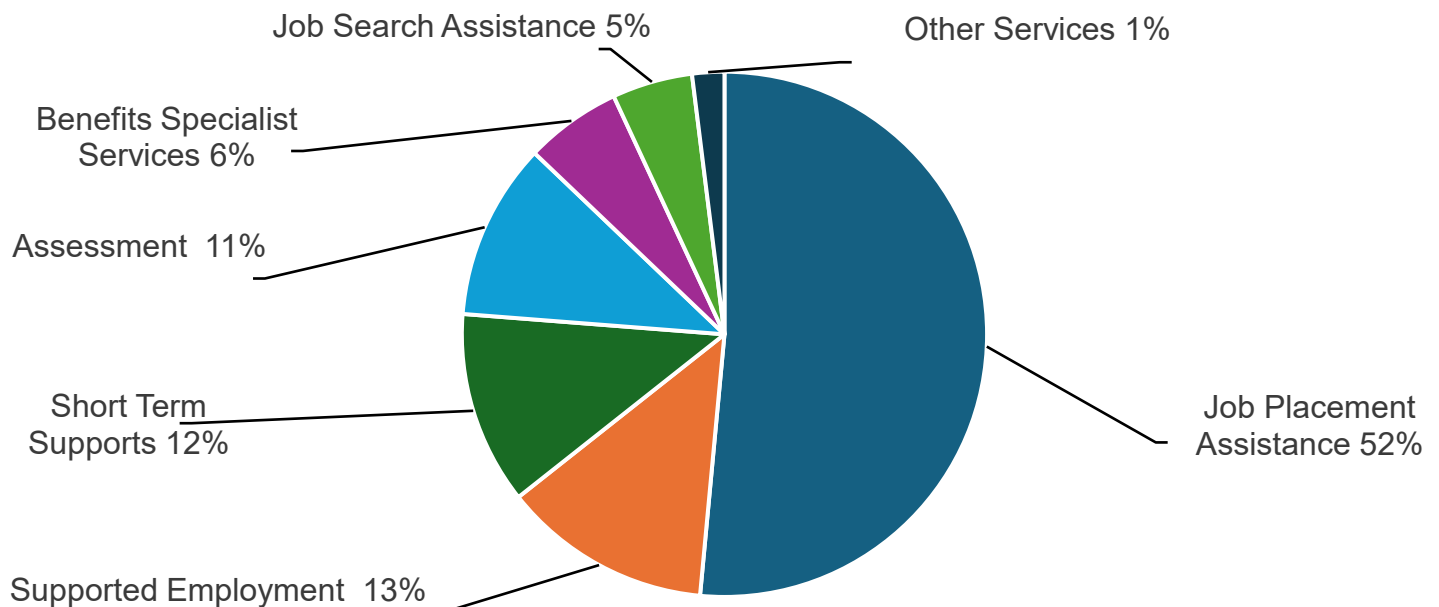
Counseling on Enrollment Opportunities 22%	Workplace Readiness 10%
Instruction in Self-Advocacy 21%	Job Exploration Counseling 13%
Work Based Learning Experiences 10%	

Pre-ETS Services Provided by VR Staff By Category



Case Service Expenditures

Job Placement & Case Service Expenditures by Category



Pie Chart Indicates: Job Placement & Case Service Expenditures by Category

Job Placement Assistance 52%

Short Term Supports 12%

Benefits Specialist Services 6%

Other 1%

Supported Employment 13%

Assessment 11%

Job Search Assistance 5%

Services Provided to Businesses

The Division has a Business Specialist who provides individualized assistance and support to eligible South Dakotans with disabilities as they prepare for employment opportunities. Staff also serve as a single point of contact for businesses throughout the state, offering no-cost technical assistance related to employing individuals with disabilities.

Staff can provide information and resources on a variety of disability-related topics, such as disability etiquette, workplace accommodations, and service animals. They also offer employee recruitment assistance and in-person training for human resources personnel, managers, and supervisors on disability awareness and inclusion in the workplace.

Staff are WINDMILLS certified and partner with two business-led organizations to provide education, awareness, resources, and training focused on hiring and retaining employees with disabilities.

Pre-Employment Transition Services

A Vocational Rehabilitation agency is required to provide **Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)** to students with disabilities. Required services include job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, workplace readiness training, instruction in self-advocacy, and counseling on postsecondary education opportunities.

During the 2024-2025 school year, VR received 675 applications for students with disabilities and served 1,723 students with disabilities which is an increase of 9.7% from the prior school year.

Highlighted Pre-ETS Services Available in South Dakota

Project SEARCH is a one-year transition-to-work program that provides students with disabilities immersive workplace training, career development, and support to gain meaningful competitive employment. Participants complete internships in a host business setting, building job skills, independence, and confidence through a combination of classroom instruction and hands-on experience. The program is a collaboration between schools, VR, and business partners, with a proven track record of successful employment outcomes. During the 2024–2025 school year, five Project SEARCH sites operated across the state, serving a total of 30 students. Of these participants, 21 have secured competitive employment statewide, earning an average wage of \$15.92 per hour and working an average of 27 hours per week.

Project Skills is a cooperative arrangement between VR and local school. VR pays for the students' wages and benefits, and the schools find the work experience sites for the students and help the students learn the job tasks. This service gives students with disabilities the opportunity to gain work experience, build references, and develop essential employability skills needed for a successful transition into adulthood. During FY25, VR partnered with 104 schools statewide to provide Project Skills placements for 456 students.

The Youth Leadership Forum is a week-long summer program for students with disabilities where students learn from peers and successful adults with disabilities who serve as leaders and role models. Students explore their own strengths and challenges, gain a deeper understanding of their disabilities, learn about disability rights and laws, and develop leadership and self-advocacy skills. 46 students attended the 2025 Youth Leadership Forum.

2025 Governor's Awards

The Governor's Awards celebrate the achievements of businesses, individuals with disabilities, and South Dakotans for their contributions toward ensuring those with disabilities have equal opportunities to employment.

Outstanding Employee with a Disability

Shawn Lyons (Pierre) led the South Dakota Retailers Association for 13 years before a sudden stroke dramatically changed his life. With the support of his family, Shawn faced his new reality with resilience, navigating disability services and assistive technology to reenter the workforce.



He launched his own business, Lyons Den LLC, and in 2022 joined the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks. There, he supports legal counsel with policy, compliance, and legislative work—bringing purpose and professionalism to a new chapter.

Shawn also shares his story to inspire others, producing motivational videos and speaking at events. He serves on the Board of Vocational Rehabilitation and his local stroke support group. Shawn is pictured with Governor Rhoden and Secretary Kevin Robling.

Outstanding Individual with a Disability

Jim Hoxie (Spearfish) turned his experience with vision loss into a powerful force for advocacy. After completing intensive rehabilitation in 2017, the retired forester began educating others about blindness, independence, and the significance of the white cane.

In partnership with retired teacher Joanna Jones, he co-authored *Grandpa's White Cane* and has led over 130 presentations across the U.S. and Canada. His outreach has reached classrooms, civic groups, and conventions, promoting awareness, respect, and inclusion for people with disabilities. Jim's work inspires more accessible and compassionate communities. Jim is pictured with Governor Rhoden and Jessica Smith.



Outstanding Private Employer (Small Employer)



Eagle Butte Co-op Association (Eagle Butte), a vital part of its rural South Dakota community, operates a hardware store, feed store, gas station, and auto shop, employing around 40 people. Under the leadership of General Manager Kathy Fischer, the Co-op has demonstrated a deep commitment to inclusive employment practices.

Partnering with Tribal and State Vocational Rehabilitation programs, the Co-op actively recruits and supports employees with disabilities through flexible schedules, accommodations, and on-the-job training. Kathy goes beyond standard practices, offering extra support like transportation, work gear, and even opening a daycare to help employees manage family responsibilities.

The result is a workplace rooted in respect, inclusion, and opportunity. For creating a supportive and empowering environment for all employees, Eagle Butte Co-op Association was honored as the 2025 Outstanding Small Private Employer. Pictured are Governor Rhoden, Kathy Fischer, General Manager, and Audra Cardwell.

Outstanding Private Employer (Large Employer)

Ken's SuperFair Foods, (Aberdeen), a family-owned business based in Aberdeen, has been a community cornerstone for decades—and a leader in inclusive employment for over 30 years. Under the leadership of Kevin Fiedler and store managers Paul and Raye, the store has built lasting partnerships with Vocational Rehabilitation, schools, and other community organizations to support employees with disabilities.



Ken's offers individualized training, job coaching, and a strong team culture built on respect and support. Employees with disabilities are fully integrated into all aspects of work, from onboarding to daily operations. Their inclusive approach not only benefits staff, it also strengthens customer service and community ties. Pictured are Governor Rhoden, Raye Nolte, Owen Weller, and Laura Stoltenburg.

Outstanding Public Employer



City of Belle Fourche (Belle Fourche) is setting a new standard for inclusive public employment. Through strategic partnerships, thoughtful policies, and a welcoming culture, the city has created an environment where individuals with disabilities are empowered to contribute meaningfully and grow professionally.

Key departments including the Tri-State Museum, Recreation Center, and Public Library, integrate individuals with disabilities into vital roles, emphasizing long-term success through training, advancement, and support.

Accommodations such as flexible schedules, accessible technologies, and modified workspaces promote independence and inclusion.

Driven by values of teamwork, respect, and open communication, the City of Belle Fourche is building a stronger, more inclusive workforce—benefiting not just employees, but the entire community. Pictured are Jason LaFayette, Governor Rhoden, Jody Westberg, Morgan Krul, and Heidi Mecham.

Outstanding Transition Services Award

Steve Hilton (Piedmont). After a 35-year career in the Fire Service, Steve Hilton found his true calling as a Special Education Teacher in the Meade School District. Since 2017, he has supported transition-age students with disabilities by blending academic instruction with real-world experience. From launching *Scooper Sam's Awesome Coffee Hut* to creating the *Bronco Bucks* life skills program, Steve equips students with the tools they need for independence.



Steve fosters inclusion by involving general education peers and collaborates closely with agencies like Vocational Rehabilitation and Special Olympics. Steve's dedication and creativity have helped countless students move into meaningful employment and brighter futures. Pictured are Governor Rhoden, Steve Hilton, and Chrissy Peterson.

Distinguished Service Award

Sandy Neyhart (Sturgis) dedicated 39 years to public service in South Dakota, most recently as Program Specialist for the Older Blind Independent Living Services Program with the Division of Service to the Blind and Visually Impaired. Her leadership expanded access to vital assistive technologies, including launching a CCTV lease/loan program that has served over 1,200 individuals.

She championed integration across services, promoted iDevice training, and helped establish the Assistive Technology Access Project. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sandy adapted quickly by launching virtual peer support groups. Respected for her innovation, compassion, and advocacy, Sandy leaves behind a legacy of meaningful impact for individuals with vision loss across the state. Pictured are Governor Rhoden, Sandy Neyhart, and Secretary Rechtenbaugh.



2025 Governor's Awards Recipients

Front Megan Krul,
Sandy Neyhart,
Kathy Fischer, Jim
Hoxie, and
Secretary
Rechtenbaugh

Back Jody
Westberg, Jason
LaFayette, Steve
Hilton, Governor
Rhoden, Shawn
Lyons, Raye Nolte,
and Owen Weller

These awards recognize South Dakota businesses, individuals with disabilities, and other South Dakotans for their contributions toward the employment of people with disabilities.

How to Provide Input to the Board

The Board is committed to hearing from the public on matters relating to the provision of vocational rehabilitation services in South Dakota under the Division of Rehabilitation Services. Consequently, all regular and special Board meetings are announced in advance, open and accessible to the public.

The Board also holds public hearings and forums as they deem them necessary. These, too, are announced in advance, open and accessible to the public.

All meetings are called by the Board Chairperson, in cooperation with DRS and Board staff, as stipulated in the bylaws.

If you wish to let the Board know your thoughts on the provision of vocational rehabilitation services, you may reach them in the following ways:

Phone: 605.494.3613

Write: Board of Vocational Rehabilitation
221 South Central Ave, Ste 33
Pierre, South Dakota 57501

Attend: Meetings – copies of agendas can be obtained by contacting Board staff at the above phone number or by going to the State of South Dakota Boards and Commissions portal at: <https://boardsandcommissions.sd.gov/>

You may also access additional Board information such as member listing, past meeting minutes and agendas on the portal.