

PRESENTATION TO THE 2022 INTERIM BUDGET COMMITTEE

Disability Employment and Transitions Division

Economic Security Services

Department of Public Health and Human Services

THE FOLLOWING TOPICS ARE COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

- **Overview**
- **Summary of Major Functions**
- **Highlights and Accomplishments during the 2023 Biennium**
- **Efficiencies and Cost Savings**
- **Funding and FTE Information**

OVERVIEW

The Disability Employment and Transitions Division (DETD) provides more than 24,000 Montanans, with disabilities, access to services designed to strengthen their economic and social well-being. Montanans living with disabilities want to be meaningful and integrated contributors to society who actively benefit from, and participate in, mainstream life. Citizens with disabilities encounter barriers to employment and independence that prevent their full and equitable inclusion in society including: negative attitudes about what it means to have a disability, discriminatory practices that deny or limit access, inadequate economic choices, and shortcomings in disability skills and resources.

DETD encourages individual and family stability, supports a person's ability to work and to be self-sufficient, and works to maximize the opportunities for independence, well-being, and health for people with disabilities. DETD carries out its work according to the values of promoting informed client choice, independent living, and self-advocacy to ensure people with disabilities are integrated into society in every aspect of their lives.

Over the last biennium, DETD expanded engagement with clients and enhanced collaboration with stakeholders to deliver programs and services that fully integrate individuals living with disabilities into society. The transition from dependence to independence is a long-term investment that strengthens Montana's diverse communities beyond the individuals served. Montanans with disabilities count on DETD and its network of disability service partners to overcome these social and economic challenges.

The division continues to implement strong controls to ensure programs are maximized within budgets to provide greater access to services for all persons with disabilities while forging partnerships with the Montana Department of Labor and Industry, local school districts, Centers for Independent Living, community rehabilitation providers, and other local vendors in communities across Montana.

SUMMARY OF MAJOR FUNCTIONS

DETD consists of five bureaus: Program Operations and Support, Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Pre-Employment Transition Services, Blind and Low Vision Services, and Disability Determination Services (DDS). In addition, DETD includes the administratively attached Montana Telecommunications Access Program (MTAP) and multiple smaller programs.

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services (VRBS)

Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services support people with disabilities to prepare for, obtain, and advance in meaningful employment by providing a range of services based on an individual's employment goals. The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselors work closely with job seekers to determine an employment goal and then identify and arrange high-quality services that lead to meaningful careers. The principle of informed choice guides the services a person receives while harmonizing with an individual's strengths, resources, interests, and capabilities. The VR program is an integral part of the state's workforce system which delivers services in collaboration with local job services, colleges, community rehabilitation providers, and numerous other partners.

Heath came to VRBS after receiving a diagnosis of Central Nervous System Vasculitis which affected his speech, memory, and dexterity. Heath had been told he could no longer work and was distraught by his prognosis. He worked with his VR Counselor to set goals, continue treatment, and coordinate with his doctor.

Heath, determined to return to the workforce, set the goal of becoming a high school teacher. Heath started to slowly work through medical treatment, fatigue, cognitive rehabilitation, and his ability to write and type. In 2019, he earned his master's degree in Education and passed his licensure exam. Heath gained employment as a high school teacher and worked his way off Social Security benefits.

His work as a teacher allows Heath and his wife the opportunity to run a summer business as backcountry guides. After years of uncertainty, Heath is back at work and back on this horse.

Business Services

Staff with Montana Vocational Rehabilitation Services work with businesses to understand their unique needs and to offer customized services. Staff help Montana businesses become aware of key disability issues; fill open positions with qualified job seekers with disabilities; assess workplace job descriptions, recruitment, and application processes to remove unnecessary barriers; and provide training with accommodations.

PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) requires public vocational rehabilitation programs to set aside at least 15% of their federal funds to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) to students with disabilities who are eligible, or potentially eligible, for VR services. This act expanded the population of students with disabilities the agency serves, along with the types of services that VR agencies may provide students with disabilities as they transition from school to postsecondary employment and education.

Pre-ETS are offered to all school-enrolled students with disabilities aged 14 - 21 in Montana. These services provide an early start to job exploration and assist students with disabilities in identifying career interests. These services provide students with disabilities the opportunities to practice and improve workplace readiness skills and to explore post-secondary training options which lead to more industry recognized credentials and meaningful employment. These services are provided in partnership with local education agencies, community rehabilitation providers, and independent living centers.

Crystal was entering her senior year of high school when she started Pre-ETS. She had experienced job loss due to her impulsivity and inappropriate social skills on-the-job. She started with a summer Pre-ETS class where she participated in roleplaying with trainers to practice proper skills and then enrolled in a work-based learning experience.

With the support of the onsite trainer and manager, the team identified communication skills and behaviors that caused Crystal problems on the job.

The team focused on building those skills so Crystal would be more successful, resulting in her being offered a job at the worksite. She maintained the position and began taking classes at the local community college to pursue her ultimate career goal of Elementary Educator.

BLIND AND LOW VISION SERVICES (BLVS)

Independent Living Service for the Older Blind Program (OBP)

These services provide older visually impaired or blind individuals with the ability to live more independently in their homes and community.

Montana Business Enterprise Program (BEP)

The Business Enterprise Program provides assistance to legally blind residents of Montana to secure and operate a vending business. Through the Randolph-Sheppard Act and the Montana Business Enterprise Law, blind vendors have access to vending opportunities on federal and state properties. Currently, the Business Enterprise Program's vending businesses include: post offices in Billings, Helena, and Missoula; Montana Women's Prison; the Capital Building vending

machines; and Rocky Mountain Labs in Hamilton.

Lucas started with BLVS in his senior year of high school when his dream at the time was to join the military. He talked to a recruiter who informed him he would not pass the military vision test.

BLVS provided guidance and counseling to support him through the loss of his lifelong dream and to begin exploring other possibilities. Through this therapeutic relationship, Lucas set the goal of becoming a detention officer. He earned degrees in psychology and forestry and gained employment as a detention officer.

After six months, Lucas decided it was not the career for him and became a volunteer firefighter. The volunteer experience gave him the training to begin a career with the USDA Forest Service as a wildland firefighter. Lucas says, "I now love my job and couldn't imagine doing anything else."

EXTENDED EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

The Extended Employment program provides support for clients with the most significant disabilities to maintain employment after the end of VR program services. Funding for job support moves from VR to Extended Employment to avoid an interruption in services. Continuous support is provided to the individual and the employer to ensure long-term job retention.

INDEPENDENT LIVING SERVICES

Independent living programs provide Montanans with disabilities the services needed to achieve their desired way of life. These core services include information and referrals to appropriate organizations, independent skills training, individual and systems change advocacy, and peer mentoring. Other services provided include benefits counseling and planning, housing information, help with accessibility issues, and personal care assistance.

MONTANA TELECOMMUNICATIONS ACCESS PROGRAM

The Montana Telecommunications Access Programs ensure that Montanans who are deaf, deaf/blind, hard-of-hearing, or speech or mobility-impaired can use traditional telecommunications equipment and services. MTAP oversees the Montana Relay program, which offers assistive equipment and services to Montanans whose disabilities make it hard for them to use the phone.

Some examples of the type of equipment the program provides are:

- Amplified phones: phones with built-in volume control that makes incoming sounds louder and tone control to make sound clearer.
- Captioned phones: phones with technology that allow individuals who are severely hard of hearing to use their voice to converse while reading the other side of the conversation on the screen display of their phone.
- Mobile devices: devices that enable those who are Deaf or have a speech or mobility challenge to use the telephone by sending messages back and forth, using voice commands, or using video relay services on either a mobile phone or an iPad.

OTHER SERVICES

Disability Determination Services

The Montana Disability Determination Services (DDS) determines medical eligibility for Social Security Disability claims. These determinations are based on federal rules and regulations.

MonTECH Assistive Technology Program

MonTECH provides free information about assistive technology devices and services for Montanans. Assistive technology includes any item, piece of equipment, software, or product system used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of persons with disabilities.

Public Transportation Coordination

Regardless of age or ability, people need to be able to get around in their community so that they can spend time with family, shop, get to appointments, and live a complete life. The 40 public transit agencies across the state provide accessible and reliable transportation for Montanans with disabilities. The Transportation Coordinator works with agencies within DPHHS and across the state to improve transportation and provide information on transportation options to their customers.

DETD includes three citizen councils whose members are appointed by the Governor

- State Rehabilitation Council
- State Independent Living Council
- Committee on Telecommunications Access Services by Persons with Disabilities

HIGHLIGHTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS DURING THE 2023 BIENNIUM

ARPA-INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EMPLOYMENT ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM

Pandemic-related layoffs disproportionately impacted the disability community. From March to April 2020, the number of employed working-age people with disabilities fell by 20 percent (950,000 people), while the number of employed working-age people without disabilities decreased by 14 percent. The American Rescue Plan Act prioritizes individuals with disabilities as an underserved and underrepresented group in the current labor force.

The Individuals with Disabilities Employment Engagement program augments current VRBS counseling staff by temporarily adding ten Vocational Rehabilitation Technicians. The program filled all the temporary positions this Spring and the increased staffing level has allowed the VR program to invite approximately 700 more individuals with disabilities off the waitlist to help them enter the workforce. It is anticipated the program will eliminate the waitlist entirely over the biennium.

COOPERATIVE DISABILITY INVESTIGATIONS

Disability Determination Service implemented a Cooperative Disability Investigations (CDI) unit in coordination with the federal Office of Inspector General (OIG), Department of Justice (DOJ), and local law enforcement. This unit leads an anti-fraud initiative that combats fraud within Social Security disability programs. The unit accomplishes its mission by reviewing questionable disability claims and investigating suspected cases of disability fraud. The Montana CDI unit reports more than \$1.5 million in projected savings to SSA disability programs and approximately \$805,200 in non-SSA programs, such as Medicare, Medicaid, housing assistance, and nutrition assistance programs. Since their inception these investigations have contributed to a projected savings to taxpayers of approximately \$2.5 million.

MONTANA RELAY FRIENDLY BUSINESS

Thousands of Montanans have hearing or speech difficulties resulting in challenges when making a phone call, especially when the recipient of the call is not familiar with a Montana Relay call. Relay users are frequently hung up on due to the pauses that take place when the message is being relayed back and forth. MTAP began offering “Relay Friendly Business” training to provide support to Montana businesses to successfully interact with their customers. Participating businesses received a “Relay Friendly Business” designation from MTAP, a storefront decal to promote their business to Montana Relay users, and are recognized on the DPHHS website.

PRE-ETS CAREER-RELATED COMPETITIONS

Career-related student competitions are work-based learning activities that require students to demonstrate mastery of career-related skills through presentations, or competitions, which are judged by professionals. Some examples of school organizations include Future Farmers of America, Jobs for America's Graduates, National Speech and Debate Association, and Health Occupation Students of America. These competitions foster creativity, provide valuable lessons, and inspire students to challenge themselves and achieve things they never thought possible. Pre-ETS partners with these organizations to ensure students with disabilities are included and have the financial assistance necessary to participate and compete alongside their peers.

EFFICIENCIES AND COST SAVINGS

EXTENDED EMPLOYMENT

Management of the Extended Employment program moved back into the division after more than a decade to achieve greater efficiency, internal controls, and cost savings. This move saved approximately \$85,000 a year and allows the fund to support more individuals with significant disabilities to maintain employment. In addition, beginning in July 2021, the program streamlined service delivery and payment by making it possible for providers to enter client's service data directly in the state's client record management system.

VRBS ELECTRONIC SIGNATURES

During the COVID-19 public health crisis, the VRBS programs pivoted service delivery to ensure accessible programs for the populations served. Many VRBS program forms require wet or electronic signatures prior to determining eligibility, developing employment plans, or procuring services. The program adopted DocuSign, a legal and secure software, to collect signatures online. Electronic signature options ensured that clients were not delayed in any area of the continuum of service and have allowed staff to meet or exceed federal timeline expectations.

FUNDING & FTE INFORMATION

Disability Employment & Transitions	FY 2022 Budget	FY 2023 Budget
FTE	134.07	134.07
Personal Services	\$11,081,775	\$9,697,706
Operating Expenses	\$5,772,194	\$5,573,528
Grants	\$755,816	\$681,682
Benefits & Claims	\$14,219,509	\$14,063,536
Transfers	\$257,750	\$234,750
Debt Services	\$15,174	\$12,597
TOTAL COSTS	\$32,102,218	\$30,263,799
	FY 2022 Budget	FY 2023 Budget
General Fund	\$6,018,814	\$6,133,898
State Special	\$1,721,683	\$1,729,482
Federal Funds	\$24,361,721	\$22,400,419
TOTAL FUNDS	\$32,102,218	\$30,263,799

