



MICHELLE LUJAN GRISHAM,  
Governor

RYAN STEWART,  
Secretary

DAN DRURY,  
Interim Director

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 3, 2021

MEDIA CONTACT: Alexa Henry, Public Information Officer  
alexahenry@state.nm.us  
505-490-7591

### NMDVR, partners announce graduation ceremonies for Project SEARCH interns

#### *30 students successfully complete program with new job skills and employment opportunities*

SANTA FE – Starting the week of May 3, four high schools across the state will be conducting both virtual and in-person graduation ceremonies for 30 students who participated in New Mexico Project SEARCH, a special year-long internship program for students with disabilities.

Project SEARCH students, who are between the ages of 18 and 21, participate in the New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation's (NMDVR) Pre-Employment Transitions Services (Pre-ETS) program and are placed at participating sites around the state through Project SEARCH, an international internship program for students with disabilities that prepares them for integrated, competitively-paid work. Throughout New Mexico, roughly 70% of Project SEARCH interns obtain work at the end of the internship year.

"We are so proud of these interns and all they have accomplished during this unprecedented school year," said Charlene Chavez, transition coordinator with NMDVR. "They rose to the challenge and as a result, gained marketable new skills and employment opportunities that will enable them to contribute to their communities. I would also like to thank everyone who supported these students—teachers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, community providers, skills trainers and businesses. These graduation ceremonies are the result of remarkable community efforts across our state."



*Gallup's 2020-21 Project SEARCH interns in the lobby of the Hilton Garden Inn, one of several work sites, with instructor David Palenschat and skills trainer Sharon Torres.*

The following is a list of all ceremonies. Click the links for more information:

[Rio Rancho – May 4, Virtual](#)

[Farmington – May 10, Virtual](#)

Albuquerque – May 10, Civic Plaza (flyer not available)

[Gallup – May 15, In-person ceremony](#)

For more information about each graduation, please visit: <https://www.dvr.state.nm.us/project-search/>

Hotona Secatero, vocational rehabilitation counselor supervisor with NMDVR who worked closely with Project SEARCH interns from Rio Rancho High School said: "We have had a great year despite the challenges and changes to be at an alternative job

site. Joe Harris Elementary was welcoming and successful. The interns were able to deal with the challenges and changes and have learned a lot of skills both virtually and in person. Staff are confident that the interns will become successfully employed given numerous skills they have learned at Joe Harris Elementary.”

Sharon Torres, skills trainer with Gallup-McKinley County Schools, who is responsible for teaching each intern specific tasks, said: “Each day that goes by everyone grows together as a team demonstrating respect, manners, and socialization, which is needed in the workplace and in the real world. In the end there comes a day when you realize that you have done your job when an intern doesn't need you anymore.”

Samuel Post, manager of Springhill Suites in Gallup, who recently hired two Project SEARCH interns and will be speaking at Gallup’s ceremony as a representative of supporting businesses, said: “My team and I have worked closely with Project SEARCH over the last two years. Over that time period, we have grown proud of the fact that we are not only teaching jobs skills and functions, but teaching critical decision making and problem-solving skills that help develop our youth and young adults. The program not only promotes diversity in the workplace, but it also allows us to positively change the interns and Graduates lives outside of work.”

“Despite pandemic conditions, New Mexico Project SEARCH, NMDVR’s pre-employment transition services program and other school and agency partners worked hard to support these students throughout the school year,” said DVR Director Dan Drury. “We are very proud of the students’ hard work and determination. Congratulations to all of them. We wish them continued success.”

Project SEARCH New Mexico is a joint collaboration of the University of New Mexico Center for Development & Disability Partners for Employment, the New Mexico Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, the New Mexico Department of Health/Disability Services, NM Workforce Connection, local school districts, and local supported employment agencies including Best Buddies of New Mexico, Adelante, Community Options/ Santa Fe, and Zia Therapy.

NMDVR supports each intern’s success with transportation training, uniforms and shoes, and a monetary stipend to cover internship related expenses and to develop saving/budgeting skills. NMDVR works closely with the supported employment agency on job leads and job development for interns once they graduate from Project SEARCH and assists with Social Security Benefits training so that interns’ benefits aren’t negatively affected by employment.

Districts interested in joining the list and helping its students with disabilities find and internship and secure employment upon graduation can contact Charlene Chavez @ [charleneb.chavez@state.nm.us](mailto:charleneb.chavez@state.nm.us)

###