

HE'S WALKED IN THEIR SHOES: FROM CLIENT TO COUNSELOR



Alex Herrera once needed the services of the New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (NMDVR). Now the 38-year-old Albuquerque native is an employee of the state agency, serving as a **Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor**.

“We facilitate the disabled into making their way into the work force,” says Herrera about the responsibilities of his position. “If they need training or accommodations, we help them. We arrange for job coaches, stuff like that.”

Herrera joined NMDVR in early 2022, based out of the South Valley office in his hometown. Working there had become a goal of his during his time as a participant in the agency’s program. “DVR did so much for me. I saw the abilities of this place—how it helped me and could help others,” Herrera says. “My original idea was to have a career in psychology, something working with people. And this fit. It felt like a perfect fit at the time, and it still does.”

His former counselor, **Anthony Harkness**, talked with Alex about potentially working in the office at least five years ago. Harkness is now the program manager for the area and Herrera’s boss. “Alex is passionate about his community. **He has the ability to be a source of hope** for the South Valley,” Harkness says. “He’s an awesome addition to the team. This is his first professional job and he’s so excited to be here.”

While Herrera helps arrange workplace accommodations so handicapped people can find meaningful work, he needs some of those accommodations himself. He suffers from ankylosing spondylitis, which he says is “like The Hulk version of arthritis; it’s arthritis on steroids.” Because of that, both sitting and standing for extended periods can be painful. Arrangements have been made so he can either sit or stand when he needs to, along with other details like an ergonomic keyboard.

The respectful way he was treated when he was a participant is the main reason he considered joining NMDVR as an employee. “I saw how my counselors were. It was important to me that they saw me as a person instead of just a number,” recalls Herrera. “Anthony always seemed to care. You can’t fake that. I thought, ‘Wow, this place is phenomenal!’”

For a while, Alex was homeless, living in his van. Now he holds a **bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of New Mexico**, earning his diploma in 2020.

“Without DVR’s help, I don’t think I would have been able to do it. It was a monumental feat, but giving up was not a choice. I just had to work every day. I couldn’t let up.”

Says Harkness, “I was impressed as his counselor with his perseverance, his resilience, and his pit-bull grip on what he wanted to accomplish.”

Looking ahead, Herrera would like to eventually pursue a master's degree, but for now he's enjoying his role in helping others who are in a situation similar to what he once faced.

“If you really want to get work, if you want to achieve something, this place will help you do it. You just have to put in the work and **DVR will get you across the goal line.**” Continuing with the football metaphor, Herrera concludes, “All you have to do is run the ball. DVR will create that nice little hole. And it's up to you to make it through.”

The New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (NMDVR) helps eligible individuals with documented disabilities find suitable employment. To do so, DVR partners with companies and agencies seeking opportunities to enhance and diversify their workforce. Vocational rehabilitation is a voluntary program supporting people who want to work. With a long history of success and proven methodology for making the best fits, NMDVR is committed to helping participants thrive in their communities. For more information, visit dvr.state.nm.us or call 505-954-8500.

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