

## BUILDING CAREERS: CARPENTERS' UNION TAKES ON NMDVR PARTICIPANTS

Since launching a partnership with the New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation in early 2023, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters Local 1319 in Albuquerque has taken on eight people with disabilities as apprentices.

The union's carpenter apprenticeship is a four-year program accredited through Central New Mexico Community College. Apprentices spend one week in the classroom every three months and the rest of the time at job sites, getting hands-on experience and expanding their skills and knowledge of the trade. Every six months, as the seven men and one woman go up a level, they receive a raise of about \$1.20 per hour. That's no small motivation.

Jesus Madrigal-Lopez is currently at level four in his eight-level apprenticeship. "I do patching, framing, and sheetrock," says the 37-year-old. "I have a pretty good job. It's something that is pretty cool."

In addition to having post-traumatic stress disorder, Madrigal-Lopez does not read English very well, so he turned to NMDVR for help in finding the right job. Not only did his counselor help direct him to a future in carpentry, but the agency was also able to assist in paying for tools, union dues, transportation to meetings and job sites—previously he could only go as far as he could pedal on his bike—and is helping him further his English education.

"The guys coming from DVR have been motivated, they've been good, and they've been grateful for the opportunity," says Local 1319 President Rosendo Najjar. "Once we got the first person in, we knew it was a great idea."

Najar never considered that bringing people with disabilities into the union was taking a chance. "I see it more as an opportunity to fill a void that we have in the trades right now," he says. "(A disability) doesn't exclude them from being able to do the work that we do. It's just a matter of finding the right spot for the right person."

Even as apprentices, the NMDVR participants are full-fledged members of the union, receiving medical insurance and benefits in addition to their education. "That helps them tremendously," says Najjar. "We give them the tools to make money. If they take those tools to the next level, it's up to them. We don't only teach working skills; we teach life skills. We're actually teaching people how to be better people, not just better craft workers."



*Three NMDVR participants at their induction into the carpenters' union. Jesus Madrigal-Lopez is in the center, Local 1319 President Rosendo Najjar on the right, and NMDVR Vocational Rehabilitation Technician Patricia Sainz is in front.*

On a project, the apprentices could be working with 50 or 60 carpenters of all backgrounds. And Najar is confident they will all find their niche.

“At the end of the day, it’s a brotherhood and they fit in well. They’re great people and they just need an opportunity to succeed.” Najar adds, “Don’t judge a book by its cover. You’ll be surprised at how much potential these people have.”

For information about NMDVR programs—as a participant or employer—contact your nearest office. There are two dozen locations across the state: [dvr.state.nm.us/locations/](https://dvr.state.nm.us/locations/).

*The New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation helps eligible individuals with documented disabilities find suitable employment. 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](https://dvr.state.nm.us) or call 505-954-8500.*

*The Vocational Rehabilitation program receives 78.7% of its funding through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. For federal fiscal year 2023, the total funds awarded is \$22,066,600. The remaining 21.3% is funded by state appropriations and transfers from the Commission for the Blind and Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.*

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