

SAVY IS MAKING HER PRESENCE KNOWN IN THE WORLD

Interacting with patrons of the Senior Center in Las Vegas, NM is an important aspect of vocational rehabilitation for Savannah Gallegos. “Sometimes people with disabilities tend to be isolated,” says her grandmother and guardian Vikki Gold. “This is one way for them to make their presence known in the world. It’s awesome.”



“Savy” is a cafeteria helper at the center four days a week, for a couple of hours each day. The City of Las Vegas created a position especially for her. While still in school, she began a work-study program through the New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, with an ultimate goal of getting hired by the city.

“I like cleaning the tables,” Savy says. Her responsibilities also include washing and drying towels and kitchen linens, cleaning the beverage machine, and sealing meals for takeout and delivery. “I like earning the money to buy music,” she adds, her favorite genre being Spanish music.

The seniors who use the center bring Savy presents, like chocolates for Valentine’s Day or beads for the holidays. “They make her feel welcome,” says Gold. “When they see her out in the community, they’ll say ‘Hi.’ I ask Savy

how she knows them, and she says, ‘From work.’”

NMDVR paid Savy’s wages and provided a job coach during an “on-the-job training” job tryout before she was permanently hired in early 2024.

“I’m very consistent with her,” Sharon Romero, Savy’s current job coach, says. “Her routine doesn’t change. I can direct her, and she knows what she needs to do.” Savy sometimes surprises her by doing her job without prompting. “She’s learned a lot. She’s pleasant to work with and she’s always happy,” says Romero, who has been working with Savy for about a year. “I’m proud of her!”

Savannah has a rare genetic mutation within the ninth chromosome, called Kleefstra syndrome, which affects the 23-year-old’s communications skills as well as physical and intellectual development. She communicates through a combination of sign language and verbal communication. “She will insist on making herself understood,” her grandmother says.

Gold adds some parents might fear losing money from Social Security if their children with disabilities work. But she concludes, “I don’t think you can put a dollar amount on a child’s sense of belonging. It is such an emotional benefit.”

NMDVR has benefits coordinators on staff who can help families determine how employment might affect Social Security income. For information about NMDVR programs, contact your nearest office. There are two dozen locations across the state: dvr.state.nm.us/locations/.

The New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation helps individuals with 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 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 2024, the total awarded is \$24,698,300. 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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