



2024 Annual Report

“MAKING CONNECTIONS”





Our Vision:

Every New Mexican with a disability is empowered with the resources to contribute to their quality of life and the economic prosperity of the State.

Our Mission:

We are committed to ensuring that every New Mexican with a disability achieves their employment goals and thrives in their communities.

Our Values:

Inclusivity–Diversity–Empowerment–Collaboration–Innovation–Respect

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

NMDVR Mission, Vision, and Values	2
Welcome Message from Director Casey Stone-Romero	4
Message from State Rehabilitation Council Chair Sarah Michaud	5
FY 2024 Highlights: CAP Findings Resolved & Order of Selection Eliminated	6
NMDVR Services & Funding Statement	7
Cities Connect to Disability Employment Awareness Month	8
FY 2024 Highlights: State Plan & Comprehensive Needs Assessment	9
Employees Connect with Each Other	10
Connecting with Schools: Project SEARCH & Pre-ETS	11
Key stats from Fiscal Year 2024	13
Success Stories: Connecting Participants to Meaningful Employment	14
Connecting with Employers	17
Disability Determination Services	18
FY 2024 Highlights: Connecting with Professionals Statewide & Nationwide	19
Making Connections Possible: Information Services Unit & IT	21
Office Locations	23



MICHELLE LUJAN GRISHAM,
Governor

MARIANA PADILLA,
Secretary Designate of Public Education

CASEY STONE-ROMERO,
Director

Dear Honorable Governor Lujan Grisham, Secretary Designate Padilla, Participants, and Partners,

The theme of this year's Annual Report is "Making Connections." The New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (NMDVR) this year has made new connections or expanded existing connections through our Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) and Project SEARCH programs, business outreach, partnerships with Tribal vocational rehabilitation programs, and relationships with other state agencies, federal partners including the Social Security Administration, and national vocational rehabilitation organizations that support individuals with disabilities.

Most importantly, by making one-on-one connections with each program participant, NMDVR's field staff continues to expand our work in fulfilling the mission of assisting New Mexicans with disabilities in achieving their employment goals.

In FY24 we assisted 523 individuals with gaining meaningful, integrated employment—84 more than the previous year. Overall, 8,338 people engaged in vocational rehabilitation services. The total combined salary of participants completing the vocational rehabilitation (VR) program was almost \$15.3 million. These New Mexicans are now more independent, they contribute to their local communities, and they return dollars to the State Treasury as taxpayers.

The New Mexico Disability Determination Services, funded through the Social Security Administration (SSA) and administered through NMDVR, processed more than 24,000 claims, exceeding all workload targets.

Among this year's highlights that you will read about were the elimination of Order of Selection to access vocational rehabilitation services and the resolution of the Corrective Action Plan imposed four years ago by the Rehabilitation Services Administration. Our leadership is well-respected around the country, as evidenced by the many NMDVR representatives who were presenters and panelists at conferences and meetings of national vocational rehabilitation organizations.

The Pre-ETS program connected with 233 more students than in FY23 and the Project SEARCH program has grown to eight locations statewide, with another scheduled to launch in fall 2025. NMDVR's Business Outreach Coordinators are successfully connecting with New Mexico employers, serving as a resource by providing training and technical assistance about the Americans with Disabilities Act, reasonable accommodations, and disability etiquette, as well as information regarding available tax credits.

Please enjoy this snapshot of the effect NMDVR has had on the entire state of New Mexico this year. NMDVR continues to make connections with new partners and make our connections with program participants more innovative and meaningful, so we can continue to provide valuable resources and positive employment outcomes to New Mexicans with disabilities.

Respectfully submitted,

Casey Stone-Romero

Casey Stone-Romero
Director



To Whom It May Concern:

The mission of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) is to assist with the operations of NMDVR through advisement, evaluation and partnership to support access to employment and promotion of a diverse workforce statewide. Members serve as the external, community-oriented voice in consideration and development of VR services. Working in partnership with NMDVR, the council helps to track and to increase satisfaction with NMDVR services, to expand partnerships with local schools and businesses, and to build connections that support people with disabilities as they seek to gain and maintain employment outcomes that accommodate their disability needs.

It is my great pleasure to write this letter on behalf of the NMDVR SRC to voice our support and appreciation of the many accomplishments of the NMDVR staff and leadership this year, which are highlighted in the attached report.

This annual report summarizes the outstanding work done by the NMDVR team to promote agency goals and services, while helping New Mexicans with disabilities to achieve their educational and employment goals. Highlights include the completion of the State Plan and the Comprehensive Needs Assessment for New Mexico, the resolution of RSA monitoring for the agency, maintenance of partnerships with VRTAC-QM and VRTAC-TA to enhance quality monitoring and ongoing technical assistance supports within the agency, modernization of technology to support staff and consumers, statewide decreases in the timeframes from eligibility to service delivery so consumers move more seamlessly toward their educational and employment goals, as well as consistently top performance by the Disability Determination Services team who lead the region in quality and maintain one of the best claims processing times in the country.

The SRC extends our thanks to the NMDVR team and its leadership for their partnership this year, and for the excellent services provided to our communities statewide. We look forward to continuing our partnership in FY25 and to building on the successes achieved this year.

Sincerely,

Sarah Michaud

Sarah Michaud
SRC Chair

CORRECTIVE ACTION PLAN FINDINGS RESOLVED

Shortly before the end of the 2024 fiscal year, NMDVR was notified in June that all findings associated with the 2021 Corrective Action Plan (CAP) issued by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) have been resolved. The CAP had been put into place after the agency was monitored in 2020 and RSA found significant deficiencies in internal controls, program provision and data. NMDVR staff have worked diligently to come into compliance with the federal regulations dictating the vocational rehabilitation program.

NMDVR received notice from RSA on June 12, 2024, that the CAP has been successfully “closed due to all criteria for establishing that the corrective actions had been effective for resolution.” NMDVR continues to work closely with technical assistance centers to ensure maintained compliance with federal statutes and regulations, including—but not limited to—the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, and the Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR). RSA further conveyed their appreciation to NMDVR staff for their work on the CAP.



Two young participants work a garden during the 2024 summer program in conjunction with Bernalillo County Open Space.

“There are absolutely not enough words to convey my gratitude for the work that went into accomplishing this goal,” Stone-Romero says. “Congratulations team!”

ORDER OF SELECTION ELIMINATED

The waitlist for NMDVR services was cleared during the 2023 fiscal year, but the agency technically remained on an Order of Selection. The Order of Selection was officially eliminated on the last day of the 2024 fiscal year, with the adoption of the 2024-2027 Comprehensive State Plan. When NMDVR completed its update to the vocational rehabilitation portion of the State Plan, it removed Order of Selection language.

The wait for NMDVR services peaked at more than 1,300 individuals in 2021. When there was a waitlist, Order of Selection meant only those deemed to have a “Most Significant Disability” could receive supports from the agency. Without an Order of Selection, people who also fit the lesser criteria of “Significant Disability” or “Not Significantly Disabled”—as defined by the RSA—can immediately begin planning to receive services.

“Our doors are open, and we are pleased to be able to assist any person in New Mexico with a disability who is seeking employment,” said NMDVR Director Casey Stone-Romero.

CONNECTING PARTICIPANTS TO MEANINGFUL EMPLOYMENT

The New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (NMDVR) provides employment and training services for individuals with a disability who want to gain, maintain, or advance in employment. Services are individualized and depend on each participant's job goal and what is needed to achieve that goal.

Some of the direct vocational rehabilitation services we provide:

- Disability and employment assessment
- School-to-work transition for high school students
- Post-secondary education assistance
- Information and referral services
- Occupational license support, including tools and specialized equipment
- Interpreter services
- Assistance with small business plan development
- Assistive technology
- Vocational and other training
- Job search and placement assistance
- Career guidance and counseling
- Resume development
- Supported employment services



Stevens Amendment Notice

Pursuant to Public Law 101-166:

The services described in this report are funded, in part, with federal funds awarded by the U.S. Department of Education under the Vocational Rehabilitation and Supported Employment Services programs.

The Vocational Rehabilitation program receives 78.7% of its funding through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. For federal fiscal year 2025, the total awarded is \$24,099,900. 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.

CITIES CONNECT WITH DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AWARENESS MONTH



The mayors of Albuquerque and Santa Fe issued official proclamations naming October 2023 as Disability Employment Awareness Month in their respective cities.

The proclamations noted that “employers can reap the benefits of hiring people with disabilities, who are skilled, loyal, and committed to their success” and that “workplaces welcoming of the talents of all people, including people with disabilities, are a critical part of our efforts to build an inclusive community and strong economy.”

The proclamations signed by Albuquerque Mayor Tim Keller and Santa Fe Mayor Alan Webber also refer to NMDVR’s mission as it relates to disability employment. NMDVR has six offices in Albuquerque and two in Santa Fe among its 24 locations statewide.

“New Mexicans with disabilities are a huge untapped resource, with a range of skills and abilities to help businesses grow,” NMDVR Director Casey Stone-

Romero said. “We bridge that talent, helping both companies and employees succeed, and we’re committed to helping employers find candidates who provide them with the potential for increased productivity, revenue growth, and strong community relations.”

Each October, NMDVR engages in efforts to spread the word to businesses regarding the benefits of employing New Mexicans with disabilities. The New Mexico endeavors are part of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, which aims to educate Americans about disability employment issues and celebrates the many and varied contributions of workers with disabilities.

The original proclamations are prominently displayed at the NMDVR State Office in Santa Fe.



STATE PLAN & COMPREHENSIVE NEEDS ASSESSMENT ARE COMPLETED



The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Combined State Plan for 2024-2027 is an extensive 495-page document developed by almost a dozen core state agencies and cabinet departments involved in the workforce system, along with other partners and stakeholders. It serves as a charter to guide the efforts of those agencies and departments for the next four years.

After much internal effort to develop the 70-page vocational rehabilitation portion of the plan, NMDVR held three public meetings to gather additional input. Field Operations Director Rudy Grano (photo, left) presents an overview of the agency's vocational rehabilitation program and proposed revisions to the State Plan at the Albuquerque meeting.

The Combined State Plan was [published](#) in June 2024.

Leading up to that, on February 28, 2024, NMDVR, in collaboration with San Diego State University, completed its Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA). Conducted every three years, this assessment evaluates the needs of individuals with disabilities to inform vocational rehabilitation programs and resource allocation. A diverse project team—including NMDVR staff, representatives from various councils and organizations, and Tribal partners—developed insightful questions and engaged in interviews and surveys to address the community's employment needs. The dedication of NMDVR staff members ensured the project's success by effectively managing data and facilitating seamless communication.

Leveraging the insights gained from the CSNA, these findings were directly applied to developing the vocational rehabilitation portion of the Combined State Plan, aligning NMDVR's services with the identified community needs. The CSNA informed the State Plan's goals, objectives, and strategies, making it a data-driven document that reflects the current landscape of employment and rehabilitation services in New Mexico. NMDVR Director Casey Stone-Romero played a critical role in shaping the state plan by providing guidance and ensuring alignment with the agency's mission and vision. Field Operations Directors were essential in translating the CSNA findings into actionable initiatives within the State Plan. This comprehensive approach ensures that NMDVR continues to meet the evolving needs of individuals with disabilities throughout New Mexico.

STATEWIDE STAFF CONNECTS IN-PERSON FOR FIRST TIME SINCE COVID



NMDVR held a two-day staff conference/meeting in September 2023 in Bernalillo. The majority of the Rehabilitation Services Unit and Administrative Services Unit attended. This was the first in-person all-staff get together since 2018. Disability Determination Services did not participate, as its staff was busy wrapping up the federal fiscal year during the last week in September. (The 2024 meeting was scheduled for November, allowing DDS to participate.)

The many group and break-out sessions delivered valuable material for both field staff and administration/support to bring back to offices all around the state. This focused time helps employees pursue the agency's mission of ensuring that all New Mexicans with a disability achieve their employment goals and thrive in their communities.



In addition, representatives from several partner agencies had information booths. Staff from the Department of Health, Disability Rights New Mexico, Developmental Disabilities Council—Special Education Ombud, and the Southern Nevada Center for Independent Living provided great networking opportunities—again with the ultimate goal of better serving NMDVR program participants.

Additional booths from the State Employee Credit Union and the Public Employees Retirement Association (PERA) presented NMDVR staffers with helpful personal finance information.

CONNECTING WITH SCHOOLS: PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES AND PROJECT SEARCH

Over the past year, NMDVR has increased connections and collaboration with local educational agencies, and transition counselors have been reaching out to students with disabilities across the state.

Per established federal law outlined in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), NMDVR dedicates 15% of its federal grant funds towards providing Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) to students between the ages of 14 and 21 with disabilities. NMDVR staff collaborates with local education agencies throughout New Mexico to provide Pre-ETS and School-to-Work Transition Services.

NMDVR now has 11 counselors across the state dedicated exclusively to transition services. Each of these counselors works closely with school transition staff, school counselors, special education staff, and students and their families. Transition counselors continue to meet with students during Individual Education Plan meetings, or during the school day where they are providing pre-employment transition services to more than 1,500 students.



Plans are underway to grow the transition team to 14 staff members. This past year, transition counselors have been able to support school districts by helping them set up work experience for students within the school and out in the community. NMDVR currently works with seven contract vendors to provide

additional pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities. School-to-Work Transition Teams continue to support the WIOA mandate for coordinated services among agencies supporting transition-age youth.



NMDVR has partnered with the University of New Mexico Center for Development and Disability's Partners for Employment (PFE) to facilitate collaborative networking meetings for all who play a role in supporting students with disabilities. These include schools, state agencies, local provider agencies, advocacy organizations, civic group leaders, and business representatives. In FY24, PFE coordinated 40 such meetings of School-to-Work Transition Teams, with 289 unique attendees. Attendees represented 65 school districts, tribal entities, state agencies, and state and local advocacy groups.

Project SEARCH & Work-Based Learning

Project SEARCH is an internationally adopted, evidence-based school-to-work internship model for youth with developmental disabilities between the ages of 18 and 22. The program

takes place at a host business and is a collaboration involving representatives from the business, the local school district, NMDVR, Developmental Disabilities Supports Division of the Health Care Authority, and PFE.

These agencies work together to provide workplace education and community-based support to students in three 10-week rotations over the course of the year. Since 2014, 120 New Mexico Project SEARCH graduates have achieved competitive employment in their communities, working at least 16 hours per week, at or above minimum wage.

Project SEARCH sites continued to thrive and achieve success across the state. In 2024, New Mexico hosted the national Project SEARCH Conference. More than 800 attendees from throughout the United States, and 30 more internationally, were treated to New Mexico culture and Land of Enchantment hospitality.

Conference-goers had several days of networking with fellow vocational rehabilitation professionals and training in the best practices for providing employment opportunities for young people with disabilities. During breakout sessions, four New Mexico Project SEARCH sites presented their successes and three graduates of the program shared their experiences and employment journeys.

Two New Mexico Project SEARCH sites, University of New Mexico Hospitals and Embassy Suites by Hilton—Albuquerque,

earned national honors for placing all of their participants into jobs after their internships concluded. The Hilton Garden Inn in Gallup was recognized for 90 percent placement, and the program in Farmington placed more than 70 percent of its interns

NMDVR is supporting the start of additional Project SEARCH sites in rural parts of the state. Central Consolidated School District in Shiprock launched in fall 2024 and a program through

Deming Public Schools is scheduled to begin in fall 2025.



2024 FISCAL YEAR BY THE NUMBERS



- **\$18.56** average hourly employee wage of participants successfully rehabilitated—an increase of \$2.87 from FY23
- **24** offices throughout the state providing services to New Mexicans
- **28** average number of days to complete eligibility
- **114** more participants in a service plan than FY23
- **93** percent of individuals applying were accepted
- **233** more students received Pre-Employment Transition Services than FY23

- **259** more applications than FY23
- **523** New Mexicans with a disability who were successfully rehabilitated—84 more than FY23
- **713** followers on social media



- **8,338** New Mexicans engaged in vocational rehabilitation services—630 more than FY23
- **24,427** SSA disability claims processed by the Disability Determination Services team
- **\$15,297,250.80** total wages for successfully rehabilitated individuals with disabilities—an increase of almost \$4.5 million over FY23.

Performance Indicators vs. Negotiated Targets

For Fiscal Year 2024, NMDVR significantly outperformed the negotiated targets in all of the five main performance indicators outlined in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

	Employment Rate 2 nd Quarter after Exit ¹	Employment Rate 4 th Quarter after Exit ¹	Median Earnings 2 nd Quarter after Exit ¹	Credential Rate ²	Measurable Skill Gains ³
Negotiated	42%	38%	\$4,600	28%	35%
Actual	47.5%	43.3%	\$5,417	40%	53.3%

¹Employment rates and median earnings refer to participants who are in unsubsidized employment in the time period outlined after exit from vocational rehabilitation program.

²Credential rate refers to percentage of participants in an education or training program who attain a recognized post-secondary credential, diploma or equivalent either during or within one year of exiting the vocational rehabilitation program.

³Measurable skill gains are defined as documented academic, technical, occupational, or other forms of progress towards a recognized postsecondary credential or employment.

NMDVR SUCCESS STORY: STILL ENJOYING HER JOB FIVE YEARS LATER

by Sharon Torres, Gallup Project SEARCH Program Assistant, and Annette Martinez, Skills Trainer



Valentina Hosteen is a former Project SEARCH intern through Gallup-McKinley County Schools. She completed her stint as an intern at the Hilton Garden Inn Gallup about five years ago, did her three rotations, and found that housekeeping was her favorite.

When the program was finished, the Hilton Garden Inn hired her as a housekeeper. At that time, she was able to clean five rooms in a day, with each room taking roughly 30 minutes to complete. At the time, five was her lucky number.

Fast forward to today, the Gallup resident's lucky number has changed to 22—because that's the number of rooms she can now clean in one day! When asked, Valentina is more than happy to help train new Project SEARCH interns and is always willing to step up and take on extra hours or days.

"Valentina is an amazing person, quiet, but she can do her job," Housekeeping Supervisor Carmelita Miller says. "She is here every day at work. Shows up early, never late, and always on time. Valentina always has a smile on her face."

Miller adds that Valentina has proven to be a dedicated and reliable asset to the Hilton team.

Project SEARCH is an international school-to-work transition internship program for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Participants gain transferable work skills and receive wraparound supports for gaining

competitive, integrated employment upon completion of the program.

Project SEARCH in New Mexico is an interagency collaboration between the New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, The Health Care Authority's Developmental Disabilities Supports Division, and the UNM Center for Development and Disability-Partners for Employment.

SUCCESS STORY: HELPING CHAD “HONE” HIS CAREER

While watching the History Channel reality program “Forged in Fire,” Chad Thompson got an idea. He had always had a fascination with swords and knives and thought he might be able to turn that interest into a career.

The obstacle was the disability the 48-year-old has had since he was the victim of a random shooting in 1999. He had worked with NMDVR previously, and the agency had helped him find work at a Carl’s Jr. fast food restaurant. But an incident there one day rekindled his Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) anxiety.

“It took me many years to come to grips with what happened,” says Thompson. “I don’t have panic attacks like I used to. Now I feel stronger, so I want to better myself. I’m not a sit-at-home type.”

This time, NMDVR was there to support his training to become a bladesmith, paying for travel expenses so he could attend the Bill Moran School of Bladesmithing at Texarkana College in Texas. “It’s the best school in the United States for bladesmithing,” Thompson says. “It seems niche, but everybody uses knives and there are big knife shows where people sell their stuff.”

He also has dyslexia, so book learning has always been a challenge for him. This hands-on education has proven to be a good fit. “I can make any sharp edge, and doing knives is so detailed,” he says. “Once you do that, you can do other machinist work (like hammers and other tools).”

Thompson is currently an American Bladesmith Society apprentice. With further education and practice, he’ll become a journey smith then a master smith. “Then you charge thousands of dollars for a knife!” And it’s not just a dream. The Los Lunas resident is working to make it happen. Through a connection made by NMDVR, he is working on a business plan. He already has a logo and business cards and expects to launch in early 2025. Until then, with NMDVR’s assistance, he has more long trips to eastern Texas to sharpen his skills and earn certifications, and more tools to buy to fill his workshop.



“The counselors have been so wonderful,” says Thompson about his experience with NMDVR. “They’ve really helped me out. Everything they said they could do, they have done.”

Of his burgeoning future, Thompson says, “I’m super stoked. People talk about how good it used to be. But my better years are still in front of me.”

He adds people should not be afraid to reach out to agencies like NMDVR for assistance. “Everybody has a disability in some way, and everybody needs a little help. Don’t be scared to ask. There’s help out there!”



SUCCESS STORY: YOU CAN'T PUT A DOLLAR AMOUNT ON A CHILD'S SENSE OF BELONGING

Interacting with patrons of the Senior Center in Las Vegas, NM is an important aspect of vocational rehabilitation for Savanah 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 NMDVR, 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" 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!"

Savanah 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."

CONNECTING WITH EMPLOYERS

There must be a “dual customer” approach to successfully find meaningful employment for NMDVR participants—the primary goal of all the agency’s efforts. The Rehabilitation Services Unit works with the participants to determine what they seek in integrated employment. And the Business Outreach Unit works with employers to let them know why hiring New Mexicans with disabilities makes good business sense.

NMDVR is committed to helping employer partners find candidates who are skilled, loyal, and committed to their success. Four Business Outreach Coordinator positions were created in 2023.



*Business Outreach Coordinator
Shawanda Bell presents at the 2024
New Mexico Workforce Conference.*

Now up-and-running, the team is dedicated to serving employers in New Mexico—providing businesses and organizations with training and technical assistance in increasing inclusive hiring and employment practices.

New Mexicans with disabilities are an untapped resource, offering employers the potential for increased productivity, revenue growth, and improved community relations.

Through the On-the-Job Training program, employers can determine, without obligation, whether the job and business are a good fit with a potential employee. NMDVR also assists employers in other ways, including reasonable accommodations and ADA guidance, liaison services between employer and employee, federal tax incentives, no cost business services, and post-hiring support.

Benefits to businesses seeking to hire New Mexicans with disabilities:

- A larger pool of qualified applicants
- No cost for business services
- Reduced recruitment and training costs
- Reduced turnover costs with employees who tend to stay on the job longer
- Federal tax incentives, when available, for employers who hire individuals with disabilities into permanent positions
- Create more efficient work processes
- Increase revenues by having a workplace that reflects the customer base
- Employing people with disabilities helps generate revenues by allowing businesses to tap into the disability market, build brand trust and loyalty, and create new products and services

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND RECOGNITION FOR DDS

The federal Social Security Administration (SSA) collaborates with—and provides 100% of the funding for—the New Mexico Disability Determination Services (DDS) to make disability determinations for the citizens of New Mexico.

Federal Fiscal Year 2024 Stats

New Mexico DDS has among the best claims processing times in the country, while meeting or exceeding all SSA workload targets and maintaining high accuracy.

- Total Dispositions: 24,427
- Initial Claims Dispositions: 102% of target
- Reconsideration Claims: 111% of target
- Continuing Disability Reviews: 100% of target
- Initial Claims Mean Processing Time: 214.5 days
 - #1 in the region
 - 15.5 days under the SSA target
- Initial Decision Accuracy: 97.9%
 - #1 in the region
 - SSA target is 97.0%
 - 100% accuracy for the October 2023 reporting period, while having the highest production week in 5+ years.

New Mexico Getting Recognition

In February 2024, SSA identified New Mexico DDS as one of the top performing agencies in the country for three consecutive fiscal years!

The New Mexico DDS was recognized at the National Association of Disability Examiners (NADE) Conference in late 2023 for its successful partnership with the nationwide SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) program, which increases access to disability benefits for people at risk of—or already experiencing—homelessness. New Mexico is

one of top 10 states with the highest approval rating.

New Mexico was honored again at the 2024 NADE Conference as one of the Top Six DDS agencies nationally providing consistently good quality service. The newly created Pre-Development Team was also recognized for its work to improve customer service by helping process claims more quickly.



At the DDS Administrators Conference in September 2024, New Mexico received an award as one of the top performing states in the nation in accuracy for the past four years.

The SSA Office of Quality Review bestowed Positive, Resourceful, and Outstanding (PRO) Awards upon Disability Adjudicator Mary Maestas and Disability Adjudicator Supervisor Emma Badalian, as well as two medical consultant doctors.

A Deputy Commissioner of Operations Award was presented to Program Coordinator Pedro Del Solar and a Team Honor Award went to the New Mexico



Medical Consultant/Psychological Consultant team.

Saving Taxpayers

The Albuquerque Cooperative Disability Investigations Unit (CDIU) **saved taxpayers almost \$2.4 million** this year. CDIU is a partnership between the Social Security Administration (SSA), DDS, and State and Federal law enforcement partners to identify and reduce SSA fraud.

During the fiscal year, the CDIU:

- Opened 21 investigations.
- Closed 26 claims.
- Denied or ceased 18 claims.

These efforts realized \$ 1,139,926 in SSA savings, \$839,857 in non-SSA savings and \$399,389 in SSA monies and civil monetary penalty, for a total of **\$2,379,172** in savings to New Mexico taxpayers.

Vacancy Rate

Early in FFY24, the unit had the lowest vacancy rate in many years at 10%. This followed an aggressive hiring campaign that brought on more than 50 new employees. Lack of a federal budget for much of the year meant SSA could not give New Mexico authority to refill positions that opened. The fiscal year ended with 39 vacancies DDS was unable to fill, raising the vacancy rate to 29%. All the accomplishments above are even more impressive when the inability to fill positions is considered.

CONNECTING WITH OTHER PROFESSIONALS AROUND THE STATE AND NATION

The expertise of NMDVR professionals is getting noticed throughout New Mexico and around the country. Staff members have been asked to present at state, tribal, and national conferences—we are appreciated by those in the know! One example: Director Casey Stone-Romero was interviewed in 2024 for a video being created by the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) to help teach best practices to new vocational rehabilitation executives in other states.

These conferences also provide additional professional development and networking opportunities for staff, increasing their knowledge bases and creating an upward cycle of even more expertise.

Here is a sample of just some of the audience who benefited from NMDVR's knowledge and experience:

- NMDVR Director Casey Stone-Romero (3rd from left), on a CSAVR panel about strategic vocational rehabilitation spending at a conference in Bethesda, Maryland.



- Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Crystal Peña and Director Casey Stone-Romero presented two sessions at the Office of Special Education Conference in Albuquerque regarding NMDVR Transition

and Pre-ETS. Stone-Romero, RSU Deputy Director Nash Sisneros, and Transition Director Charlene Chavez gave a similar presentation at a New Mexico IDEA Panel Meeting.



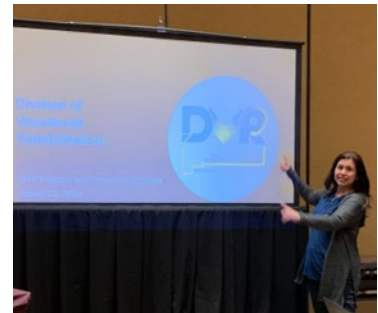
- Three NMDVR staffers attended the Consortia of Administrators for Native American Rehabilitation (CANAR) conference in Chandler, Arizona. They had been asked to join Jemez Vocational Rehabilitation in representing New Mexico at the national confab and were introduced under the flag of Jemez Pueblo.

- Director Casey Stone-Romero and Field Operations Directors Mario Lucero and Rudy Grano participated in a national study/focus group supported by CSAVR to examine VR funding and spending strategies.



- Field Operations Director Rudy Grano made a presentation to political staffers, members of CSAVR, and employees of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) in Washington, DC. Grano had the opportunity to meet with retired Senator Tom Harkin, co-author of the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

- Transition Coordinator Charlene Chavez and Field Operations Director Antoinette Holmes were presenters at the Parents Reaching Out conference in Albuquerque.



- Rehabilitation Services Staff Trainers Monica Moya and Dominique Nuñez gave a presentation titled “Customer Service Delivery to Those with Disabilities” at the Department of Workforce Solutions New Mexico Workforce Conference. That was one of just four presentations and panel discussions led by NMDVR experts at the conference.

- Field Operations Director Mario Lucero (right) served as an expert on the “Challenges and Opportunities Panel” during the Northern Regional Workforce Professional Development Conference in Santa Fe.



Other conferences attended by NMDVR employees include Association of People Supporting Employment First, National Employment Network Association, National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute, National Association of Disability Examiners, National and Regional DDS Administrators, New Mexico Assistive Technology, National AgrAbility, Four Corners Regional Alliance, and Reaching New Heights in Supported Employment.

DDS also hosts an annual Tribal Leadership and Advocate Summit, which connects tribal leaders in New Mexico with statewide services available to tribal members.

MAKING CONNECTIONS POSSIBLE: ISU & IT

In the age of virtual meetings, and with 24 NMDVR offices around the state, technical connections are more important than ever. These literal connections are made by the Information Systems Unit (ISU). The ISU team provides information technology (IT) systems and services throughout the agency.

The effective and efficient IT support of agency staff results in more cost-effective, quality services to New Mexicans with disabilities. Some ISU highlights for FY24:

- Increased Rehabilitation Services Unit (RSU) cell phone lines by 27% from the previous year.
- Acquired new equipment for RSU including UbiDuos, laptops, web cams, and power banks.
- Upgraded Wi-Fi access at offices all across the state.
- Utilized New Mexico Department of Information Technology resources to upgrade internal systems.
- Piloted broadband connection for public use and backup internet connectivity.
- Continued to stay on top of cybersecurity threats, keeping NMDVR’s servers and systems secure.
- Kept abreast of developments in artificial intelligence (AI) and the opportunities and challenges of using AI.



The Information Services Unit keeps NMDVR plugged in, allowing employees to make all the connections seen in this report.

- Got the new Albuquerque-Research office up-and-running with the latest technology, ensuring no gaps in service during the staff move from a previous office.



Large conference room at the Albuquerque-Research office, occupied by NMDVR in January 2024.

NEW MEXICO DIVISION OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION LOCATIONS

FIELD OFFICES

Alamogordo

2300 Indian Wells Rd
Alamogordo, NM 88310
Phone: 575-437-6550
Toll-free: 888-901-7868

Albuquerque-Lomas

111 Lomas Blvd NW, Suite 422
Albuquerque, NM 87102
Phone: 505-383-2500
Toll-free: 888-818-3259

Albuquerque-Quail

5205 Quail NW
Albuquerque, NM 87120
Phone: 505-836-1774
Toll-free: 888-818-3263

Albuquerque-Research

10510 Research Rd. SE, Suite 800
Albuquerque, NM 87123
Phone: 505-841-6450
Toll-free: 866-526-0863

Albuquerque-South Valley

1710 Rio Bravo SW
Albuquerque, NM 87105
Phone: 505-877-7673
Toll-free: 888-815-2981

Carlsbad

3605 National Parks Highway
Carlsbad, NM 88220-1448
Phone: 575-885-8821
Toll-free: 800-645-0258

Clovis

100 E. Manana Blvd. #17
Clovis, NM 88101
Phone: 575-763-3437
Toll-free: 800-645-2143

Española

710 B La Joya St
Española, NM 87532
Phone: 505-753-2908
Toll-free: 888-901-3647

Farmington

3401 E. 30th St. Suite B (Physical Address)
P.O. Box 960 (Mailing Address)
Farmington, NM 87499
Phone: 505-327-5123
Toll-free: 888-901-7901

Gallup

312 East Nizhoni Blvd
Gallup, NM 87301
Phone: 505-726-1429
Toll-free: 800-279-5681

Hobbs

2120 North Alto #109
Hobbs, NM 88240
Phone: 575-393-3330
Toll-free: 888-201-5859

Las Cruces

3381 Del Rey Blvd.
Las Cruces, NM 88012
Phone: 575-524-6135
Toll-free: 888-901-7866

Loretto Towne Center
505 South Main Street, Suite 142
Las Cruces, NM 88001
Phone: 575-524-6135

Las Vegas

32 NM 65 Hot Springs Blvd.
Las Vegas, NM 87701
Phone: 505-425-9365
Toll-free: 888-901-7865

Los Lunas

445 Camino Del Rey SW, Suite D
Los Lunas, NM 87031
Phone: 505-864-1617
Toll-free: 888-901-7902

Rio Rancho

3791 Southern Blvd. SE, Suite 210 (Physical Address)
P.O. Box 15430 (Mailing Address)
Rio Rancho, NM 87174
Phone: 505-896-4500
Toll-free: 866-585-5446

Roswell

1014 S. Atkinson Ave.
Roswell, NM 88203
Phone: 575-624-6024
Toll-free: 800-644-7732

Santa Fe

525 Camino De Los Marquez, Ste 200
Santa Fe, NM 87505
Phone: 505-827-3526
Toll-free: 800-773-4072

Silver City

3088 32nd St. Bypass Suite A
Silver City, NM 88061
Phone: 575-538-5351
Toll-free: 888-901-7861

Socorro

1014 N. California
Socorro, NM 87801
Phone: 575-835-4243
Toll-free: 888-901-7903

Taos

145 Roy Road, Suite C
Taos, NM 87571
Phone: 575-758-4348
Toll-free: 888-901-7869

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES**Santa Fe State Office**

1596 Pacheco St., Suite 203
Santa Fe, NM 87505
Phone: 505-954-8500
Toll-free: 800-224-7005

Albuquerque-Oakland Administration Office

5200 Oakland Ave NE
Albuquerque, NM 87113
Phone: 505-954-8500

Disability Determination Services

7421 Bartlett Dr. NE
Albuquerque, NM 87107
Phone: 505-841-5600
Toll-free: 800-432-5868

Office locations and contact information can also be found at: www.dvr.state.nm.us/locations