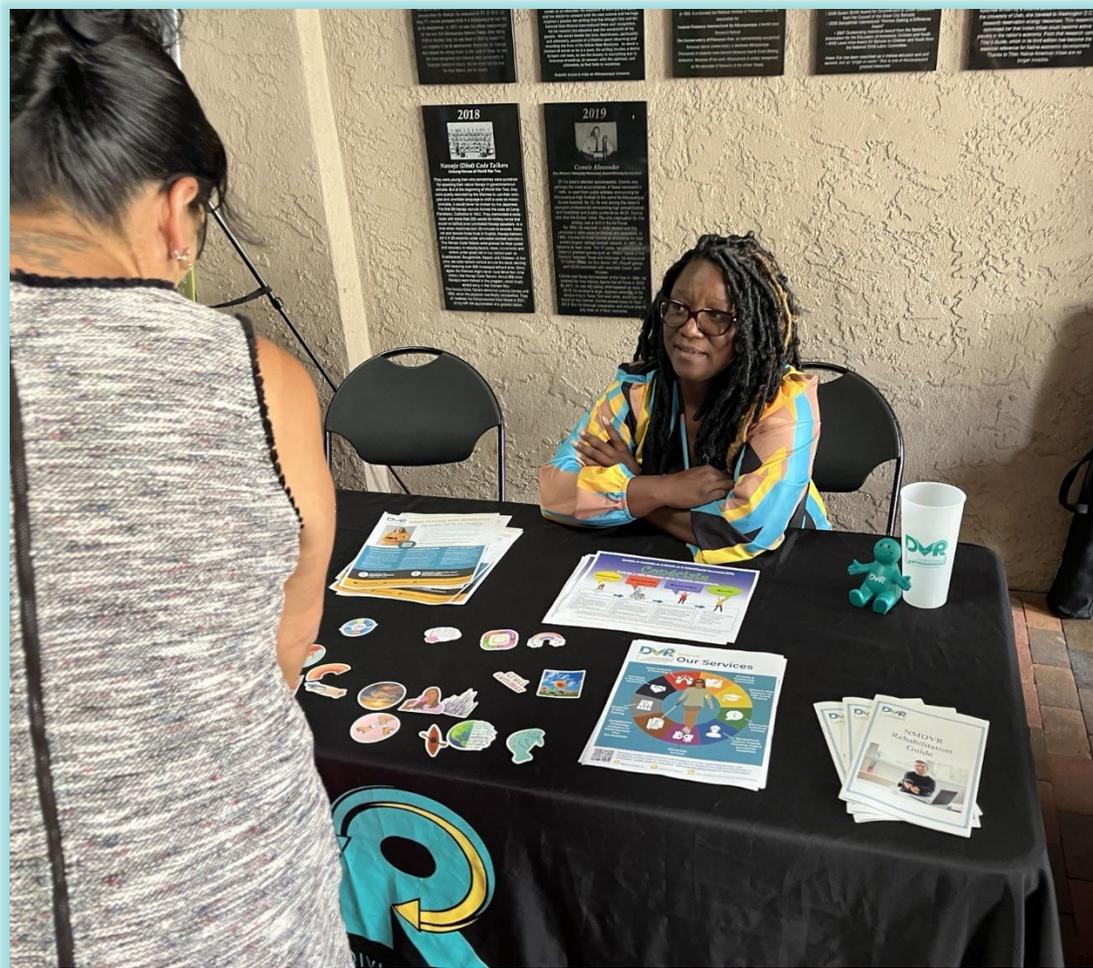




NEW MEXICO DIVISION OF
VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

PUBLIC EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

2025 Annual Report





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.

Photo ©peoplecreations

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MICHELLE LUJAN GRISHAM,
Governor

MARIANA PADILLA,
Secretary of Public Education

DR. STEPHON L. SCOTT,
Director

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

Fiscal Year 2025 marked a period of steady progress and organizational renewal for the New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (NMDVR). The Division successfully navigated a midyear leadership transition while maintaining operational stability and advancing priorities that strengthened accountability, policy alignment, and statewide service delivery.

FY25 also unfolded amid evolving federal landscapes, including proposed restructuring of the U.S. Department of Education—home to the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA)—and operational changes within the Social Security Administration (SSA), which oversees the state’s Disability Determination Services (DDS). These national discussions introduced fiscal and policy uncertainty for state partners, reinforcing the importance of stability, transparency, and collaboration within NMDVR’s programs.

NMDVR remained focused on measurable outcomes and modernized operations to better serve New Mexicans with disabilities. We updated the Manual of Operating Procedures, refined vocational rehabilitation policies, and strengthened collaboration with key partners—including the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), the Commission for the Blind, Disability Rights New Mexico, and the Statewide Independent Living Council. The Division also completed the final Corrective Action Plan from RSA on schedule and maintained compliance across all RSA reporting measures, reaffirming the integrity of our federal partnership.

NMDVR also supported 8,718 individuals in pursuing their career goals while assisting 645 New Mexicans achieve competitive, integrated employment. Participants collectively earned more than \$19.1 million in wages—demonstrating the tangible impact of vocational rehabilitation on individual lives and statewide economic growth.

Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) provided 5,601 services to students through career readiness training, while Project SEARCH had 56 interns across eight host sites—demonstrating clear examples of how education and employment systems can work together to create lasting opportunity. FY25 also saw the launch of the nation’s first tribal Project SEARCH site in Shiprock and another site in Deming in FY26. Two other sites earned national recognition for achieving 80+ percent placement of their interns.

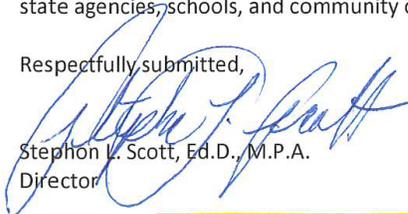
Transition and outreach efforts expanded through pilot partnerships with workforce agencies in Española, Santa Fe, and Taos, while new tools such as virtual-reality headsets supported career exploration for students statewide. Those initiatives strengthened pathways from school-to-work and showcased how local innovation can scale through collaboration.

DDS sustained a 99.3 percent decisional accuracy rate, ranking third nationally, while managing ongoing federal staffing constraints. The unit’s performance continued to highlight New Mexico as one of the leading DDS agencies across the nation.

FY25 also reflected the Division’s commitment to professional development, fiscal responsibility, and innovation. Across all areas of the Division, staff engaged in professional learning, cross-training, and performance improvement efforts that support a more resilient organization. Notably, the Rehabilitation Academy returned to in-person delivery, with expanded leadership and succession-planning components based on national best practices.

As we look ahead to FY26, we remain committed to operational excellence, equitable access, and strong partnerships across state agencies, schools, and community organizations.

Respectfully submitted,


Stephon L. Scott, Ed.D., M.P.A.
Director


Kendra Karp
Interim Director, January-August 2025

November 26, 2025



To Whom It May Concern:

The relationship between the New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (NMDVR) and the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) is outlined in the Rehabilitation Act through 34 CFR (361.17) with required functions defined to review, analyze, advise, and develop plans that are effective. This partnership with the state agency, New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED), and the state unit, NMDVR, is designed to support the ability of individuals with disabilities to achieve employment. With viewpoints from many areas of life for people with disabilities, we have worked with NMDVR to continually improve the activities provided to the full spectrum of New Mexicans with disabilities.

Part of our commitment is to provide information on the successes and challenges of our work and that of NMDVR. On behalf of the SRC, I voice our support and appreciation of the interactions and accomplishments this year as highlighted in this report. This year, NMDVR made significant strides by expanding robust training across all service areas through VR Technical Assistance Centers, Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators, the UNM College of Employment Services, and partnerships with New Mexico universities to improve Vocational Counselors' licensure and certifications. More staff have been educated about budgeting, fiscal forecasting, and data collection improvements as well as enriched studies for leadership. The collaboration with Tribal VR Programs, Transition services and sustaining the improvements from compliance in the Corrective Action Plan continues to be addressed. The SRC has been attentive in maintaining the great services improvements from last year with the three Directors this year.

Regarding direct SRC activities, we have the Consumer Satisfaction Survey required in the Rehabilitation Act slated for completion in early 2026. We also collaborated with the New Mexico Governor's Office to replenish the necessary membership with committed, engaging individuals, who actively participated in the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment to apply its findings to service improvements, and supported collaboration with required partners as outlined in the Rehabilitation Act.

The SRC extends our thanks to the NMDVR team and their leadership for their partnership this year and for the services provided to our communities statewide.

Sincerely,

Tracy Agiovlasis, SRC Chair

NEW MEXICO PROJECT SEARCH MAKES HISTORY

Central Consolidated School District in Shiprock launched its Project SEARCH program in fall 2024 with four students, becoming the nation's first tribal Project SEARCH site.

Project SEARCH is an internationally adopted, evidence-based school-to-work internship model for youth with developmental disabilities between the ages of 18 and 21. 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 Partners for Employment.

These agencies work together to provide workplace education and community-based support to students in three 10-week rotations over the course of the academic school year. Since 2014, about 150 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 continue to thrive and achieve success across the state, with 56 interns participating. Transition counselors help with assessment days and provide support to Project SEARCH staff throughout the year. Two locations—Hilton Garden Inn in Gallup and Rust Presbyterian Medical Center in Rio Rancho—earned national recognition for placing more than 80% of their interns in permanent employment.



Central Consolidated School District Project SEARCH team

A ninth Project SEARCH site in New Mexico started at Deming High School for the 2025-26 school year, partnering with the City of Deming.

Project SEARCH programs in New Mexico:

- University of New Mexico Hospital/Albuquerque Public Schools
- Embassy Suites Hotel/Albuquerque Public Schools
- Presbyterian Rust Medical Center/Rio Rancho Schools
- Hilton Garden Inn/Gallup McKinley County Schools
- The Hive Education/Gadsden Independent School District (Santa Teresa)
- Holloman Air Force Base/Alamogordo Public Schools
- City of Farmington/Farmington Municipal Schools
- Central Consolidated School District (Shiprock)
- City of Deming/Deming Public Schools

NMDVR continues to support the launch of additional Project SEARCH sites in rural parts of the state.



Interns from Gadsden Independent School District had the opportunity to attend the 2025 State Legislature session.

HOW WE HELP PARTICIPANTS FIND MEANINGFUL EMPLOYMENT

The New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (NMDVR) provides employment and training services for eligible 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 was \$26,800,619. 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.

DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AWARENESS MONTH CONFERENCE

A coalition of state agencies and organizations committed to supporting New Mexicans with disabilities hosted the inaugural Disability Employment Awareness Month Conference & Hiring Event in Albuquerque in October 2024.

This symposium brought together individuals, employers, and community leaders to raise awareness and promote employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. It provided a unique platform for employers to connect with potential candidates, share resources, and learn about the benefits of hiring and supporting employees with disabilities.



Outgoing NMDVR Director Casey Stone-Romero served as emcee for the conference.

Part of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, the free event celebrated the contributions of workers with disabilities and highlighted the importance of fostering inclusive workplaces.

Outgoing NMDVR Director Casey Stone-Romero served as emcee and the keynote address was delivered by Northern New Mexico College President Hector Balderas, former New Mexico Attorney General. Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham issued a proclamation officially declaring October 2024 as Disability Employment Awareness

Month throughout the state.

A hiring event took place following the conference, where employers from various industries met with job seekers to recruit talented individuals with disabilities, epitomizing the ultimate goal of disability employment awareness.



Panel discussion at the inaugural New Mexico DEAM Conference & Hiring Event.



(From left) Lisa McNiven of the Governor's Commission on Disability, Department of Workforce Solutions Secretary Sarita Nair, and outgoing NMDVR Director Casey Stone-Romero with proclamation from Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham.

NMDVR HONORED BY MANDY'S FARM



NMDVR received an Inclusive Employer Award from Mandy's Farm, an Albuquerque nonprofit that "assists individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in achieving their goals for living, learning, and working in the community."

NMDVR has worked with Mandy's Farm on several projects and initiatives in recent years. Program Manager Anthony Harkness, who has spearheaded many of the collaborations, was a guest speaker

during an awards luncheon held in conjunction with National Disability Employment Awareness Month in October 2024.



STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL AWARDS

NMDVR'S State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) honored two organizations, two NMDVR employees, and one program participant with awards in late 2024.

"There were many deserving nominees from all across the state," said outgoing SRC Chair Tracy Agiovlasitis. "In selecting honorees, we considered successful partnerships with community-based employers, commitment to inclusive hiring practices, empowering individuals, person-centered services, provision of high-quality services, and noteworthy achievement resulting from successful employment."

The 2024 SRC Award recipients:

- **Outstanding Employer: United Brotherhood of Carpenters Local Union 1319, Albuquerque.** The union's paid apprenticeship can lead to a Journeyman's license for the many NMDVR participants they have hired, and in just two years they have become a [key employer partner](#) of NMDVR.



Representatives of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters accepted their award from Chair Sarah Michaud and Vice Chair Tracy Agiovlasitis.



Staff members, along with two Assistance Dogs of the West, with their SRC Award.

- **Outstanding Nonprofit/Provider: Assistance Dogs of the West, Taos.** The organization has shown that students can successfully hold a job with the skills they learn in their Pre-Employment Transition Services program.

- **Outstanding NMDVR Supervisor: Lisa Jones, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Supervisor, Alamogordo.** Jones is a patient and supportive leader and

trainer for her staff, with a sense of humor—all while taking on vacant caseloads herself.

- **Outstanding NMDVR Staff Member: Kim Archuleta, Business Analyst II, Santa Fe State Office.** Archuleta works tirelessly to overhaul essential financial operations within the agency.

- **Outstanding NMDVR Participant: Levi Heisinger, Alamogordo.** Heisinger was [employed as a full-time educator](#) at the New Mexico Museum of Space History at the age of 19. He also is continuing his education at New Mexico State University-Alamogordo and is creating braille-like plates of all the major constellations for students at the New Mexico School for the Blind and Visually Impaired to learn about astronomy.



(From left) Outgoing NMDVR Director Casey Stone-Romero, Lisa Jones, and SRC Member Jen Gelhardt.



Levi Heisinger's counselor, Crystal Hicks, presenting his award.

Organizational awards were presented at the Disability Employment Awareness Month Conference and Hiring Event in Albuquerque in October. Individual awards were presented at the NMDVR Statewide Staff Conference in Bernalillo in November. Heisinger received his award at a December ceremony at the NMDVR office in Alamogordo, attended by several of his co-workers from the museum.

The New Mexico State Rehabilitation Council reviews, analyzes, and advises the New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. Tasked with partnering with NMDVR to ensure the highest quality services are made available to those seeking support services, the SRC acts as the external, community-oriented voice in the consideration and development of NMDVR policy. Council members represent a broad range of disabilities and organizations interested in helping New Mexicans with disabilities secure gainful employment.

STATEWIDE INDEPENDENT LIVING COUNCIL CELEBRATES SUCCESS

NMDVR is the Designated State Entity for the New Mexico Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) and Centers for Independent Living (CILs), and the agency is the fiscal partner for the independent living network.

In FY25, the SILC unveiled a new logo and New Mexico CILs celebrated several successes, achieving notable capacity-building outcomes and allowing them to expand needed services to unserved and underserved communities.



New SILC logo

Choices Center for Independent Living, Roswell:

- Secured a new, suitable facility that better accommodates staff and consumers.
- Added a full-time staff position to strengthen service delivery.
- Expanded outreach efforts to increase community engagement and impact.

San Juan Center for Independence, Farmington:

- Continued focus on core services, youth advocacy, and outreach initiatives.
- Currently serving 745 active consumers.
- Hiring an additional transportation staff member to improve accessibility and support consumer needs.

Other Highlights:

- SILC became fully compliant with the Indicators and Assurances as dictated by the Rehabilitation Act, for the first time since 2018.
- The SILC created and distributed a Statewide Unmet Needs Survey that will help determine areas of need in services and outreach to geographic areas of the state.
- The SILC has created educational advocacy papers that have been shared with the administration, legislators, and disability partners to unify multiple organizations that work with people with disabilities and other vulnerable populations.

“The IL Network’s ability to build capacity is critical because it will empower consumers, foster collaboration, expand service reach, and ensure IL values are sustained statewide,” said New Mexico SILC Executive Director Kathy Cooper. “That is good not only for people with disabilities, but for everyone in New Mexico.”

VIRTUAL REALITY—THE OTHER VR

The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program has entered the realm of the other VR: Virtual Reality. Transfer Trek is an immersive, multi-modal career exploration solution with interactive assessments, virtual reality simulations, and easy career planning tools, making career exploration more accessible and engaging for learners. This year, NMDVR began to utilize Transfer Trek sets in its transition programs with students.

Transition staff learned the system and began working with students in their school districts to experience careers they are interested in exploring after high school. This provides opportunities for students to explore various vocational choices. Already, more than 250 student “explorers” have explored 464 careers.



FINAL CORRECTIVE ACTION PLAN SETTLED

The federal Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) notified NMDVR in late 2024 that a Corrective Action Plan (CAP) for non-compliance regarding Pre-Employment Transition Services was fully resolved. This CAP was the result of NMDVR and the Commission for the Blind not spending the required 15 percent of its federal grant on services for youths with disabilities in Federal Fiscal Year 2020, during the height of the COVID pandemic.

In the meantime, the two New Mexico agencies illustrated that policies were implemented and actions taken to show issue has not recurred since 2020 and to ensure future compliance.

“Based on the information provided by NMDVR and NMCB to date, RSA has determined that New Mexico Vocational Rehabilitation agencies, including NMDVR and NMCB successfully implemented corrective actions that resolved the FFY 2020 Section 107 Pre-ETS Non-Compliance Letter,” the RSA reported.

The resolution of the Corrective Action Plan makes NMDVR officially “CAP Free!”

2025 FISCAL YEAR BY THE NUMBERS



- **\$18.88** average hourly employee wage of participants successfully rehabilitated—an increase of **32 cents** an hour from FY24
- **24** offices throughout the state providing services to New Mexicans
- **25** average number of days to complete eligibility—**3** fewer than FY24
- **56** interns participated in the yearlong Project SEARCH program at **8** locations around the state
- **99.3%** decisional accuracy in processing claims by Disability Determination Services (tied for **#1** in the U.S.)

- **645** New Mexicans with a disability attained successful employment—**122** more than FY24
- **1,015** followers on social media
- **2,433** new Individualized Plans for Employment (IPEs) developed
- **5,601** Pre-Employment Transition Services provided to students with disabilities
- **8,718** New Mexicans engaged in NMDVR services—**380** more than FY24
- **\$19,120,227.36** total wages for successfully rehabilitated individuals with disabilities



Performance Indicators vs. Negotiated Targets

NMDVR outperformed the negotiated targets in three of the five main performance indicators outlined in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and were close to target in the other two.

	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	43.0%	41.5%	\$5,080	39.1%	53.4%
Actual	42.4%	44.1%	\$5,663	41.3%	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.

SUCCESS STORY: FORMER SOCCER STAR HELPS OTHER ATHLETES

Not too many people can say they got their dream job right out of college. Angel Flores is one of the lucky ones. Flores is the assistant athletic trainer for women's soccer at the University of Texas–El Paso (UTEP). Practice is every day during the season, and she's at work by 6:30 a.m. and at the field by 8:00 with her medical equipment and enough water for the players. She tapes ankles and knees before practice; then back inside after practice, she provides therapeutic treatments and helps players with any pain they're experiencing.

"It was an absolute goal of mine to pursue a career in D1 women's athletics, especially soccer," Flores says. The NCAA's Division I (D1) is comprised of the intercollegiate athletics programs at the country's largest universities.



Angel was a star soccer player in Alamogordo. She came to NMDVR after being diagnosed in high school with dyslexia and dyscalculia—sort of dyslexia with math and numbers—which led to anxiety. Although she found relief on the soccer field, she needed NMDVR to help arrange classroom accommodations with the school. These included extra time for homework, being allowed to take exams in an empty classroom, and a special pen that recorded while she wrote.

Then, during her junior year, she suffered a traumatic brain injury in an auto accident that ended her chance of playing D1 soccer. Through perseverance, support from her family, and encouragement from mentors at school, she graduated from high school.

"I was done playing, but I could still be involved in soccer by helping other athletes," Flores remembers. She enrolled at New Mexico State University—first at the Alamogordo campus, later transferring to the Las Cruces main campus—studying sports medicine. In doing so, she became the first person in her family to go to college. "The professors wanted me to succeed once they saw I wanted to be there and wanted to learn. Even though they knew about my learning disability, I wasn't treated differently."

Flores especially thrived doing the hands-on portions of the curriculum and earned her Bachelor of Science in Athletic Training. NMDVR continued to assist Angel through her college years, both with financial assistance for tuition and fees and in helping to provide necessary technology to help her in her studies. Upon graduating, she was immediately hired at NMSU as athletic trainer for the cross country team. She got the soccer job at UTEP just a few months later.

"These athletes make it worth it," Flores says. "They're kind because they know I'm there to help them. When they're vulnerable, they can rely on me." She travels with the team, staying in hotels and eating meals with the players. "It's awesome to be part of that journey with them."

As for Angel's future, she is pursuing a master's degree in education and would like to take her current career to the next level, as an athletic trainer in the National Women's Soccer League. "Although my plans have changed through the years, I knew I always wanted to be in soccer and I'm doing it. That's the coolest thing ever!"

SUCCESS STORY: WORKING WITH CHILDREN FULFILLS LIFELONG DREAM

After completing her Project SEARCH internship at The Hive Education in Sunland Park, Estrella Villanueva was hired to work full-time in the organization's N.M. Children First Learning Center. The job has been a dream come true for Estrella.

"It's mostly daycare and education stuff," she explains. "We do activities with them, help them eat breakfast and lunch. The bigger kids serve themselves, but we feed the babies. We do activities, play music, and sing with them."

Villanueva has a learning disability she says came from not getting enough oxygen to her brain when she was born. "I had a lot of trouble reading and writing." But with her brother as her tutor, "Now I'm doing a little more. He got me to a new level." And she speaks two languages.



The 22-year-old was promoted to an assistant teacher when another staff member went on maternity leave. Those new responsibilities were the impetus to push through her reading challenges to earn a certificate in early childhood education from Eastern New Mexico University-Ruidoso. Now she is pursuing an associate degree from Doña Ana Community College in Las Cruces.

Her Project SEARCH instructor has no doubt that Estrella will succeed in whatever she puts her mind to. "From the get-go, she's been very ambitious," Patricia Garcia says. "She was ecstatic (to get her job) because she always wanted to work with children. Once she got the position, I saw she was always hungry to learn more. The sky's the limit; I don't see this being the end of it."

"I like the position I'm in now, but I would like to work in an elementary school," Villanueva says about her future goals, adding the kids make it all worthwhile. "When you feel like you're having a rough day, the children pull you up and put a smile on your face."

Villanueva's maturity makes her a role model for current Project SEARCH participants. "She's an amazing example for our incoming interns because of her positive attitude," according to Garcia. "She's very encouraging."

Estrella's time in Project SEARCH taught her responsibility and even provided her with parenting skills, which are important now that she has her own new baby.

"It gives you a lot of experience when you're going to be working in a job. It got me far," says Estrella. "Working there helped me learn a lot of things to help me take care of my daughter. They helped me a lot in life."



SUCCESS STORY: PROJECT SEARCH MAKES HOSPITALITY TANYA'S CAREER

In 2017, Tanya Vitela had two options for her Project SEARCH internship through the Albuquerque Public Schools: UNM Hospital or a brand-new program with Embassy Suites.

"The hotel industry sounded really fun," Vitela recalls. As a kid, she had watched *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*, a Disney Channel sitcom set in a hotel, "So I decided to go there."

Vitela is now a night auditor and front desk agent at the Sheraton Albuquerque Uptown. As night auditor on weekends, she "balances the house;" works with third-party providers like Expedia; and checks on settlements for reservations, food charges, pet fees, and other miscellaneous things. Working the front desk three days a week, Tanya checks guests in, pre-blocks rooms, answers phone calls, makes sure housekeeping is on track, and handles special requests.

The hotel also hosts crews from seven different airlines that fly into the Albuquerque International Sunport, and she ensures they are taken care of.

"I make sure the guests are happy. I always felt I could help others and make people happy," says Vitela, who moved from California to New Mexico in 2005. "It's pretty fun seeing all my guests."



She adds that, unlike many of her coworkers, she enjoys the paperwork involved in her full-time job. Vitela hopes her experience and knowledge of hotel operations will lead to a promotion to supervisor or manager one day. "I feel I have a purpose. I'm very determined," she says.

General Manager Damen Kompanowski says Tanya is already on track. "When you're night auditor, you're kind of the manager on duty. She makes a lot of big decisions and takes control of the hotel. We can always count on her." He notes Tanya redesigned the night audit checklist to make the task flow more practical and prepare the morning staff for the new day. "When Tanya came to work for us, she was timid and shy. We love seeing her continuing to grow in her job."

This career in hospitality was a direct result of her time in Project SEARCH a school-to-work transition program for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Participants gain transferable work skills and receive supports for gaining competitive, integrated employment upon completion of their internship.

Tanya's year at the Embassy Suites included stints in sales, banquets, the kitchen, and the front desk. "I learned so much about the hospitality industry and how everything correlates to one another," she recalls.

Project SEARCH in New Mexico is an interagency collaboration between NMDVR, the Health Care Authority's Developmental Disabilities Supports Division, the UNM Center for Development and Disability-Partners for Employment, and local school districts.

EMPLOYER SUCCESS STORY: ALBUQUERQUE ISOTOPES

If people want to spend the spring and summer working for the Albuquerque Isotopes Triple-A baseball team, the organization will try to find a spot for them. So, when Program Manager Cara Benta met with team representatives to find employment for participants, the team was more than happy to partner with NMDVR.



“We try to be inclusive,” said Isotopes General Manager John Traub. “It doesn’t matter age or ability. We want to make sure people feel they are included and feel welcome to be part of what we’re doing here.”

Elijah Schroeder worked in the “Fun Zone” and Hilario Hernandez was part of the cleaning crew, both in stadium operations. “We look for people who are going to represent the organization in a positive manner,” Traub said, adding Elijah and Hilario fit well into his team’s lineup. “They’re young; they’re dedicated; they take the job and the opportunity seriously; they’re dependable and enthusiastic. That’s what we hope for with all of our employees.”

Schroeder graduated from Volcano Vista High School in Albuquerque and is planning to study at Central New Mexico Community College. “I needed valuable work experience,” said the 18-year-old. “This was the best option for me, and the pay’s not bad.”

He appreciated that his supervisors were accommodating to his needs, and the job allowed for a flexible schedule. He also liked to take advantage of the employee discount at the concession stands.

Hernandez said, “I thought it would be a fun and interesting job. The game is pretty interesting.” The 18-year-old graduate of Valley High School added he would consider doing it again next year.

Taking the family out to the ball game is discretionary spending, so management’s goal is to provide a quality day or evening for the more than half-million people who come out to see the top farm team of the Colorado Rockies play each year. Says Traub, “We’re not hiring people to play second base. We leave that to the major league club. We look for people to work in support roles to put on the best entertainment and fan experience possible.”



It takes a lot of people to run an operation like the Isotopes, including New Mexicans with disabilities. “We try to be representative of the community around us. We’d be doing a disservice to the community if we weren’t interested in all people who are looking to work here.” Traub added, “They have to be able to do the job, of course, and take the job seriously.”

Elijah and Hilario stepped up to the plate all season long.

BUSINESS OUTREACH: REMOVING BARRIERS & CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

The Business Outreach Unit (BOU) supports the NMDVR mission by providing education, consultation, and technical assistance to employers who currently employ—or are interested in employing—individuals with disabilities. Through targeted outreach, the BOU delivers training and support on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), reasonable accommodations, assistive technology, and other disability-related topics. In alignment with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the



Business Outreach worked with TRDI (The Training, Rehabilitation & Development Institute) to hire seven participants at the Holloman Air Force Base dining hall.

BOU collaborates with employers and community partners to promote disability awareness and inclusion, enhances access to skilled talent, and strengthens the overall competitiveness of New Mexico's workforce. These efforts directly support WIOA's employer services goals, particularly in assisting businesses to meet workforce needs while advancing opportunities for individuals with disabilities to achieve meaningful employment.

The Business Outreach Unit has made significant progress in expanding statewide capacity and strengthening employer partnerships this past year. Key accomplishments include:

- **Statewide Coverage:** A Business Outreach Coordinator (BOC) is now assigned to each region, ensuring consistent employer engagement and responsive service delivery across New Mexico.
- **Program Leadership:** The addition of a dedicated Program Manager has enabled the standardization of policies and procedures, development of performance benchmarks, and improved inter-agency coordination.
- **Training and Certification:** All BOC staff are certified ADA Coordinators and Basic Office Ergonomic Assessors, with plans underway to obtain mediation training to better support employer-employee communication and workplace conflict resolution.
- **Curriculum Development:** The team developed and revised multiple training modules focused on ADA compliance, disability awareness, and inclusive hiring practices, supporting employer education statewide.
- **Targeted Industry Collaboration:** Working in partnership with other NMDVR staff, the BOU continues to identify high-demand industries aligned with participant career interests and facilitate direct connections between employers and qualified job seekers.
- **Increased Community Awareness:** The BOU significantly expanded its presence at community and employer engagement events across the state. This increased visibility has enhanced collaboration with workforce partners, promoted disability inclusion initiatives, and directly supported the achievement of WIOA performance objectives. The BOU also expanded its media engagement efforts by being featured on an episode of the television program *Job Hunt New Mexico*, collaborating with the America's Job Center on the creation of targeted social media content, and has engaged in planning for interviews in partnership with the Museum of Space History and a radio station serving Otero and Lincoln Counties to further promote disability inclusion and workforce development initiatives.

DDS SHARES EXPERTISE WITH EDUCATORS

Disability Determination Services Director of Special Programs Greg Duran and Professional Relations Supervisor Kryss Duran were presenters at the Public Education Department’s Office of Special Education “Winter Special Education Academy” in January at the Santa Ana Pueblo. Attendees included school district superintendents, principals, special education directors, and teachers.



The Durans (no relation) provided an overview of the Social Security program, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and the federal and state relationship between the Social Security Administration (SSA) and New Mexico DDS.

Titled “From Application to Approval: Insights into Disability Determination Services,” their presentation also covered exactly what DDS needs from schools, special ed departments, and teachers to help make an accurate medical determination for individuals who file for Social Security Disability benefits. More than 100 education professionals attended the three sessions they hosted.

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 2025 Stats

New Mexico DDS has among the best claims processing times in the country, while maintaining high accuracy.

- Initial Decision Accuracy: 99.3%
 - Tied for 1st nationally
 - SSA target is 97.0%
- Performance Accuracy: 97.4%
 - #2 nationally
 - SSA target is 90.6%
- Initial Claims Mean Processing Time: 210.9 days.
 - Top 25% nationally

- 4.1 days under the SSA target
- 3.6 days fewer than FY24

“PRO”-fessionals Honored

New Mexico DDS staff earned seven **Positive, Resourceful, and Outstanding “PRO” Awards** from the SSA Office of Quality Review. The award acknowledges outstanding work on specific—often complicated—cases. Some awards were given to several people who worked together on cases.

Honorees were Disability Adjudicators Jenna Seigel, Lina Sabado, John Smith, Philip Bustamante, Michele Cockayne, Concepta Hernandez, and Cristina Garcia; Supervisors Emma Badalian and Ulysses Puccetti; and Quality Assurance Specialist Megan Unfried.

Other DDS Highlights

- Supervisors and managers began biweekly leadership huddles, increasing communication and ensuring leadership works collaboratively to support staff.
- Creation of multiple “Did You Know?” peer-driven staff trainings.
- An activities committee planned and coordinated fun and engaging activities to keep morale levels high.
- Internal Quality Assurance staff increased adjudicative mentorship capacity.
- Fiscal Unit ensured vendors were paid and services performed for, or on behalf of, DDS complied with all standards and expectations, following state and federal requirements.
- Team 6, the Predevelopment Unit, continued to be flexible with changes in priorities and remained active and engaged, supporting units across the agency.
- The Consultative Exam Unit, while challenged with staffing resources, eliminated pending CE scheduling queues and maintained its lowest-ever pending workload.
- Case Control Unit engaged with SSA Field Offices to ensure DDS appropriated receipts and disposed claims within its jurisdiction.
- Program Coordinators successfully led DDS through its annual SSA security audit with no findings again in FY25, while also working cases to support the disposition goals of the agency.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: GAINING & SHARING KNOWLEDGE

Professional development helps employees in the field acquire the skills and experience to successfully assist NMDVR program participants in achieving their employment goals, while giving them the knowledge base and certifications that will help them earn promotions and make a career in vocational rehabilitation. And, over the course of FY25, fifteen employees earned promotions.

Rehab Academy is a two-week internal course for new vocational rehabilitation counselors, technicians, and other staff working directly with participants. The first week is designed to train and enlighten new hires on NMDVR procedures, expectations, and best practices. This helps ensure consistency and build confidence in the field. During week two, community partners are invited to speak about the shared vision of helping participants from the very start of their NMDVR journey. Through two academies, 41 employees took part in the training in FY25.



Financial trainings were held for RSU staff in all areas of the state. The nine sessions had a total of 105 attendees. Another 95 employees attended three regional trainings provided by the New Mexico Technology Assistance Program and 141 staff members attended job development agreement and process overview trainings. Other topics covered by RSU Staff Development Trainer Dominique Nuñez included Pre-Employment Transition Services/Project SEARCH, documentation, self-employment, eligibilities, benefits, Title IX, AWARE Data, and updates to the Manual of Operating Procedures.

Managers underwent leadership training as well as fiscal forecasting training, both provided by the Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management (VRTAC-QM). A total of 65 staffers attended those two trainings. Field Operations Director Mario Lucero also participated in the National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute.

Conferences around the state and country increase staff and leadership expertise and provides an important opportunity to network with fellow vocational rehabilitation professionals to share best practices. Some of the conferences attended include:

- Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR)
- Consortia of Administrators for Native American Rehabilitation (CANAR)
- Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE)
- National Association of Disability Examiners (NADE)
- National Employment Team Summit
- Partners for Employment/Reaching New Heights
- National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative (NTACT:C)
- Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Employment (VRTAC-QE)
- National ADA Symposium
- Ticket to Work Training Symposium
- New Mexico Disability Employment Awareness Month Conference
- New Mexico Public Procurement Association

Licensure and certifications guarantee that NMDVR employees are qualified to provide services to our participants. In FY25, fourteen field staff earned Association for Community Rehabilitation Educators (ACRE) certification, involving an intensive 15-week competency-based training course in collaboration with Partners for Employment at the UNM Center for Development and Disability. Overall, 76 current NMDVR staff members now hold ACRE certification. Another 23 new employees received their initial Vocational Rehabilitation Certificates, provided by the Public Education Department.

KEEPING FUNDS FLOWING: THE ASU FISCAL UNIT

In order to serve the people of the state, the New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation must keep tight control of its budget and ensure that funding entrusted to the agency is spent wisely. Responsibility for the \$64+ million budget falls to the NMDVR Fiscal Unit, under the direction of Administrative Services Deputy Director David Soveranez.

The Fiscal Unit consists of four areas: Grants Management and Budget; Accounts Payable; General Ledger; and Procurement and General Services. The Fiscal Unit's objective establishes accountability for the accounting functions of NMDVR. Accountability requires NMDVR to follow standards for proper recording, summarizing, and reporting of ALL financial transactions. State Statute NMAC 2.20.5.8 requires that the Chief Financial Officer must ensure the model, accounting practices, established by NMDVR, are followed.

As of the end of FY25, the 17-member finance team had a combined 285 years of state and federal government experience! It is truly a knowledgeable, experienced, and hard-working crew that supports all of NMDVR's programs.



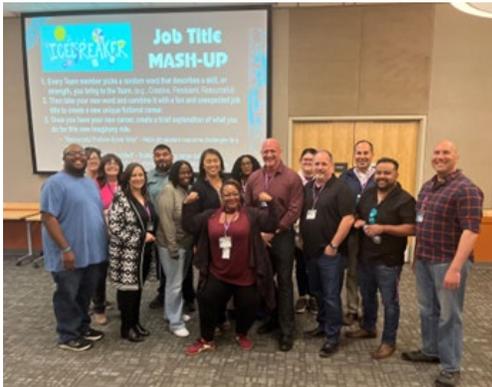
CONNECTIONS & COMPUTERS: INFORMATION SERVICES

In FY25, NMDVR's Information Services Unit (ISU) delivered a portfolio of high-impact modernization, security, and support initiatives. Collectively, these efforts retired legacy risk, reduced long-term operating costs, strengthened cybersecurity compliance, and enhanced the client and staff experience. Each initiative was aligned to federal mandates, fiscal responsibility, and the agency's mission delivery. Some of the strategic ISU accomplishments included:

- Case management system project, ensuring continuity of operations, stability in federal reporting, and predictable costs for the agency's most critical business application.
- Modernizing the disaster recovery plan, which now reflects cybersecurity standards and business requirements.
- Expanding storage and enhancing system performance.

- Upgrading to next-gen Wi-Fi, strengthening and expanding Wi-Fi capabilities and access.
- Enhancing access control following an assessment of access and surveillance needs.
- Enhancing and expanding core network infrastructure at the Oso Grande data center.
- Modernizing infrastructure by replacing outdated 11 virtual servers and mail machines statewide and upgrading router software and network switches.
- Enhancing security through improved database access controls and upgrades to firewalls and servers.
- Upgrading several customer-facing applications to support vocational rehabilitation programs.

WORKING TOGETHER WITH OTHER AGENCIES HELPS ALL NEW MEXICANS



NMDVR staff members joined America’s Job Center New Mexico (formerly Workforce Connection) for an All Systems Training in Hobbs in February, hosted by the Eastern Area Workforce Development Board.

The day included a discussion about upcoming initiatives and the vision and goals for improving workforce development in the eastern part of the state. Current labor market statistics were shared to keep attendees informed about industry trends, areas of job growth, and programs that might be most beneficial to participants based on market demand.

“There were lengthy discussions on the importance of ensuring everyone who walks into the offices is enrolled in all available programs,” said Business Outreach Coordinator Crystal Hicks, who added that success stories were shared from individuals who have benefitted from being enrolled in multiple programs. “All in all, it was a very beneficial gathering.”

The New Mexico Technology Assistance Program (NMTAP) held a training in front of a full house at the Albuquerque-Research office on May 15. The training regarding advancements in assistive technology is part of the memorandum of agreement between NMDVR and NMTAP.



NETWORKING AT DISABILITY PRIDE



July is Disability Pride Month, and NMDVR participated in several events to share information about the agency's programs with prospective participants, and also taking the opportunity to network with other agencies and organizations from throughout the state that support New Mexicans with disabilities.

Benefits Advisor Andrea Gotcher and Vocational Rehabilitation Technician Star Martinez were at the 2nd Annual Disability Pride New Mexico Parade and Celebration on the Santa Fe Plaza.



NMDVR was one of about a dozen organizations and state agencies at a celebration commemorating the 35th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act at the New Mexico State Capitol ("The Roundhouse"). The program, including a special flag raising ceremony, was sponsored by the Public Education Department's Office of Special Education and involved about a dozen organizations and state agencies.

Public Relations, Communications, and Legislative Coordinator Jeff Levine (center, in photo on right) with Nathan Gomme, Executive Director of the Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and Lisa McNiven, Deputy Director of the Governor's Commission on Disability. The three were among more than 100 people in attendance at the 3rd Annual Santa Fe Accessibility Awards sponsored by Disability Pride New Mexico.



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

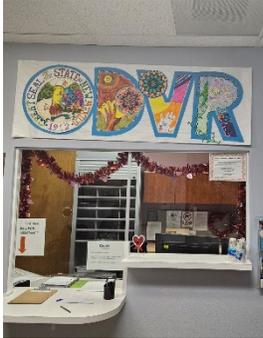
505 South Main Street, Suite 142
Las Cruces, NM 88001
Phone: 575-524-6135

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