

A LIVED EXPERIENCE NOW HELPS OTHERS

NOTE: New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (NMDVR) Counselor Suzette Wilson from the Carlsbad office shares the story of a participant's success with a personal connection.

“I can start by saying I became a participant when I was released from Broward Correctional Institution in Florida. I was diagnosed at age seven with Myotonic Muscular Dystrophy (MMD) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) due to child sexual abuse. Needless to say, upon my release, I had developed post-traumatic stress disorder and bipolar II with anti-social psychosis to add to the labels list.



Photo courtesy of the Grant County Beat

“I visited Carlsbad with an over-the-road truck driver in 2004 during Hurricane Charlie and then did the permanent geographical change in 2005 thinking that was the trick to change my life. I was wrong!

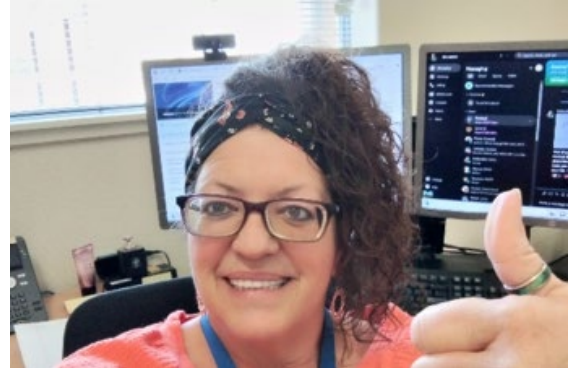
“I found all the wrong friends in every twist and turn, but was led to NMDVR where I became a participant under the guidance of (former counselor) Barry Jolly. Barry was patient, genuine, and went out of his way to accommodate my needs for several years until an attempted suicide changed the direction of my path. A new vocational rehabilitation technician onboarded and

gave a fresh set of eyes to see my potential. Andrew McDonald was instrumental in giving me an IQ test and other inventories were implemented. I'll never forget the day we reviewed my results: he said, 'You're going to college.' I laughed and said, 'Nope, not for me.' He told me he was not going to continue to watch me waste a perfectly good brain any longer and would close my case if I didn't comply!

“Now I know that is not how they're supposed to approach their participants, but he read me and understood that he had to get through my hard headedness to progress toward an outcome of sustainable employment. I complied and began at New Mexico State University-Carlsbad to earn my associate degree in general studies. But two weeks after my graduation, I relapsed and rode off on a date with the devil for the next five or six years until I got into trouble again.

“Fast forward eight years: I completed all sanctions with full compliance and went to work at the Villa De Esperanza Rehabilitation Program (now LifeHouse). This was a good position for me to stay focused on recovery and help others along the way. But COVID struck and the company went bankrupt leaving me without a job. That's when I heard Andrew's voice again in my head: 'You're going to college!' So, I researched my options and enrolled with Western New Mexico University (WNMU) for rehabilitation counseling. I had no idea how many disciplines fall under the counseling umbrella and technology is my greatest challenge, so doing online classes was super scary. But (current Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Supervisor) Kayla Damron was now my counselor and her strategies were essential in empowering me to 'just do it!'

“I never once thought about employment with NMDVR, but as I approached my practicum, I realized that I had outgrown the desire to be an addictions counselor due to my inner awareness of personal triggers. I re-assessed my goals and chose to place distance between myself, addiction, and the setbacks that can accompany this diverse population. I reached out to Program Manager Larry Melendez to request acceptance into the NMDVR worksite to fulfill my internships and within several months, much to my surprise, was offered employment as a vocational rehabilitation counselor.



“It has been a tough road, to say the least. If I could do one thing differently, I would have paid closer attention to the courses that involved assistive technologies and focused more on the skills for working with people with disabilities. Thankfully, I had a few phenomenal instructors who impacted the core concepts of working with this diverse culture. I have a new perspective on this trajectory and believe I can help make a difference for people with disabilities who have previously been shunned or culturally misunderstood.

“My heart is true and my spirit is pure as I stand alongside of an amazing team of purveyors of hope! I owe my success thus far to both past and present supports within the system of NMDVR. This is my story!”

NMDVR Counselor Suzette Wilson

Postscript: Suzette Wilson graduated with her Master of Arts degree from WNMU in May 2026.

For information about how NMDVR can help you achieve your employment goals, contact your nearest office. There are two dozen locations across the state: dvr.state.nm.us/locations/.

The New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation helps individuals with disabilities find suitable employment. Vocational rehabilitation is a voluntary program supporting people who want to work. With a long history of success and proven methodology for making the best fits, NMDVR is committed to helping participants thrive in their communities. For more information, visit dvr.state.nm.us or call 505-954-8500.

The Vocational Rehabilitation program receives 78.7% of its funding through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. For federal fiscal year 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.

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