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STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ANNOUNCES 2026 AWARD WINNERS

SANTA FE (October 1, 2026) – The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) of the New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (NMDVR) has announced the recipients of its awards for 2026. The SRC this year is honoring two school programs, a vocational rehabilitation program participant, and two NMDVR employees.

“The SRC is proud to present these awards to five well deserving individuals and organizations,” says SRC Chair Tracy Agiovlasitis. “The award recipients share a deep commitment to training, education, and building a culture of continuous learning for NMDVR participants and staff alike.”

The 2026 SRC Award recipients are:

- **Outstanding Service Provider: Project SEARCH Gallup-McKinley County Schools.** Instructor David Palenschat and Skills Trainers Sharon Torres and Annette Martinez provide exceptional service to students with disabilities, supporting the interns as they transition into adulthood and employment. Gallup Project SEARCH has been recognized four times in the last six years for achieving employment rates above 70%—placing them among the most effective Project SEARCH teams nationwide.
- **Outstanding Employer: HMS Nutrition Services, Hobbs High School.** HMS Nutrition Services collaborates with Hobbs High School and NMDVR to provide meaningful Work-Based Learning for students with disabilities. They have created an inclusive, supportive environment where students develop the skills and confidence needed for competitive integrated employment. Through this partnership, HMS has provided numerous students with authentic workplace experiences that reflect real employment expectations while offering individualized support and encouragement. Their staff has a genuine commitment to help each student succeed.
- **Outstanding NMDVR Participant: James Herndon III, Las Cruces.** With support from NMDVR, Jimmy [graduated magna cum laude](#) from the University of New Mexico Law School in 2026 and has been accepted into the Master of Laws program at the University of Edinburgh Law School in Scotland, with a focus on environmental law and climate change. His goal is to pursue environmental justice law in the public interest.
- **Outstanding NMDVR Supervisor: Larry Melendez, Program Manager for Alamogordo, Silver City and Las Cruces-Loretto.** One of his employees calls Melendez an “influencer of positivity.” He supports employees at all three offices he manages, promotes their professional growth and is dedicated to providing additional assistance to ensure everyone on his team thrives.
- **Outstanding NMDVR Staff Member: Stephanie Alvarez, Vocational Rehabilitation Technician, Las Cruces.** Alvarez consistently goes above and beyond her assigned responsibilities by taking the initiative to train and mentor new vocational rehabilitation staff. “Her dedication to teaching others has strengthened the team’s overall performance and contributed to a more collaborative work environment,” says one colleague. Her support ensures “participants receive the best service and supports NMDVR has to offer.”

The awards will be presented to the honorees during October in conjunction with National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

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.

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 2026, the total awarded is \$26,147,963. 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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