


pennsylvania
DEPARTMENT OF LABOR & INDUSTRY
OFFICE OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION



OVR 2023 Annual Report

Message from our Executive Director

This past program year has been filled with many successes for PA OVR. We have brought millions of additional federal dollars into Pennsylvania to enhance and expand services to our customers through the SSA reimbursement process and two Disability Innovation Fund Grant programs. The first, the InVEST project, will assist individuals who are engaged in, or may be considering, subminimum wage employment to move into competitive integrated employment. Our Pathways to Partnership program will develop work-based learning opportunities and robust transition planning for students with disabilities, as well as opportunities for youth service professionals from OVR, the Office of Developmental Programs, the PA Department of Education, and Centers for Independent Living to participate in professional development.



We have staff speaking at state and national conferences to share all the wonderful things that OVR is doing to impact the lives of our customers, and we are once again being recognized nationally as a leader in the field of vocational rehabilitation (VR) through our outcomes and innovative services. We have expanded our partnerships through the MY Work program, the Commonwealth Internship Program, and the DCNR Outdoor Corps. We have breathed new life back into our Summer Academies and have implemented countless other local initiatives and employer partnerships.

There is always work to be done in VR, improvements to make, and challenges to overcome. That's why I'm incredibly proud of our customers, staff, and partners for what we have accomplished together and the dedication we have maintained to our collective goal – helping people with disabilities access their employment and independent living goals. I'm excited to continue to work together to create further opportunities for those we serve.

As many of you know, our primary services are geared towards employment, which can make all the difference in someone's life, empowering them to independence, community involvement, and fulfilled lives. People with disabilities are the most untapped talent pool for employers to consider, and, as more people with disabilities participate in the workforce, PA businesses and our communities and state will thrive!

I hope you enjoy reading this report and getting to know some of our change makers who are demonstrating that when we work together to Hire Ability, to help individuals' goals become those success stories, truly, we all succeed.

State Board of VR

The Pennsylvania State Board of Vocational Rehabilitation (SBVR) was authorized by the [State Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1988](#). The SBVR is the policy-approving body for OVR services to individuals with disabilities. Its responsibilities include:



- Establishing the philosophy, mission, and goals for OVR.
- Establishing and reviewing policies regarding the development of vocational rehabilitation (VR) services.
- Preparing and publishing the State Plan.
- Reviewing programs and activities that affect VR services.
- Assessing the extent to which policies, programs, and activities provide incentives or disincentives to the establishment of community-based services for individuals with disabilities; the integration of individuals with disabilities into the community, school, and the workplace; and contribute to individuals with disabilities' independence and dignity.
- Providing the governor and General Assembly advice, recommendations, legislative proposals, and additional information the Board deems appropriate.

Current State Board Members: Theo Braddy, Jennifer Christman, Liza Conyers, Joseph Drenth, Michael Kiel, Kevin McDonough, Peg Monaghan, Bruce Schwartz, and Fred Wright.

PaRC

The Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council's (PaRC's) mission is to inform and advise OVR, legislators, and the governor on the diverse issues affecting vocational rehabilitation. As required by the Rehabilitation Act, a majority of PaRC members are individuals with disabilities and represent 16 categories. The scope of the Council's responsibilities includes, but is not limited to, collaborating with OVR in writing the VR portion of the combined state plan, conducting the statewide needs assessment, and participating in policy development workgroups. In addition to meeting quarterly, the PaRC has standing committees whose members work tirelessly on various projects throughout the year.



Current PaRC Members: Julia Grant Barol, Lorie Brew, Sylenthia Dent, Paul Fogle, Joan Goodman, Lynn Heitz, Passle Helminski, Twana Jones, Jessica Keogh, Michelle Leahy, Michelle Mitchell, Michelle Paonessa, Andrew Pennington, Kara Donatucci Pham, Susan Tomasic, and William Del Toro Vargas

Program Year 2022-23¹ Vocational Rehabilitation Highlights



65,296 individuals engaged with OVR²



\$47.21 M estimated annual government savings⁴



17,619 new applicants



\$6,997 average per-person cost of services for an employment placement



19,247 students received Pre-Employment Transition Services³



10.1 months projected time to recover investment



5,654 individuals placed into employment

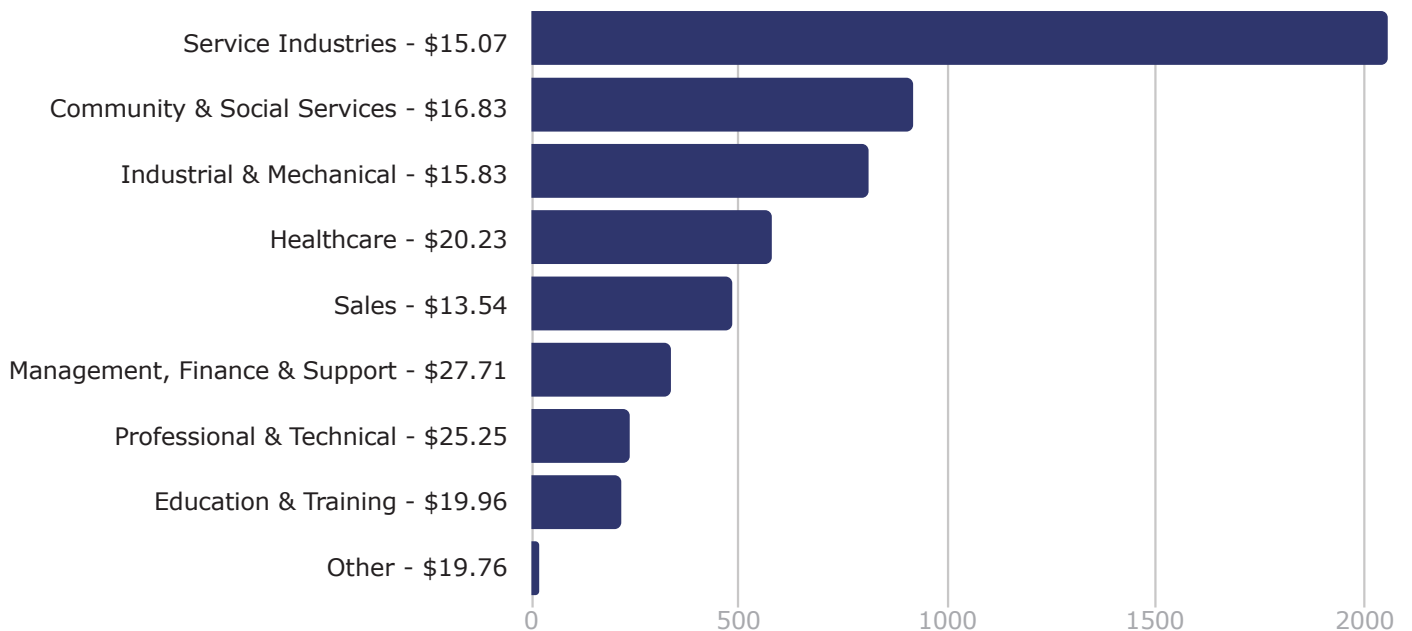


76% Hiram G. Andrews Center Employment Rate⁵



\$17.24 average hourly wage of individuals employed

Occupations OVR Customers Are Working in



¹ Program Year (PY) 2022 began 7/1/2022 and ended 6/30/2023.

² Number of OVR customers who had an open VR case as of June 30, 2023, or had their case closed during the Program Year 2022.

³ Includes potentially eligible students and students with OVR cases, and both purchased and staff-provided services.

⁴ Based on estimated income taxes, total average annual SSA reimbursement, and SSA benefits that may decrease or end due to employed individuals achieving SGA levels established by the SSA.

⁵ Six-year running average of program graduate employment.



OVR Staff attended **2,335** Individualized Education Plan meetings.



OVR provided **2,618** students **\$22,182,802** in financial aid for post-secondary training or education

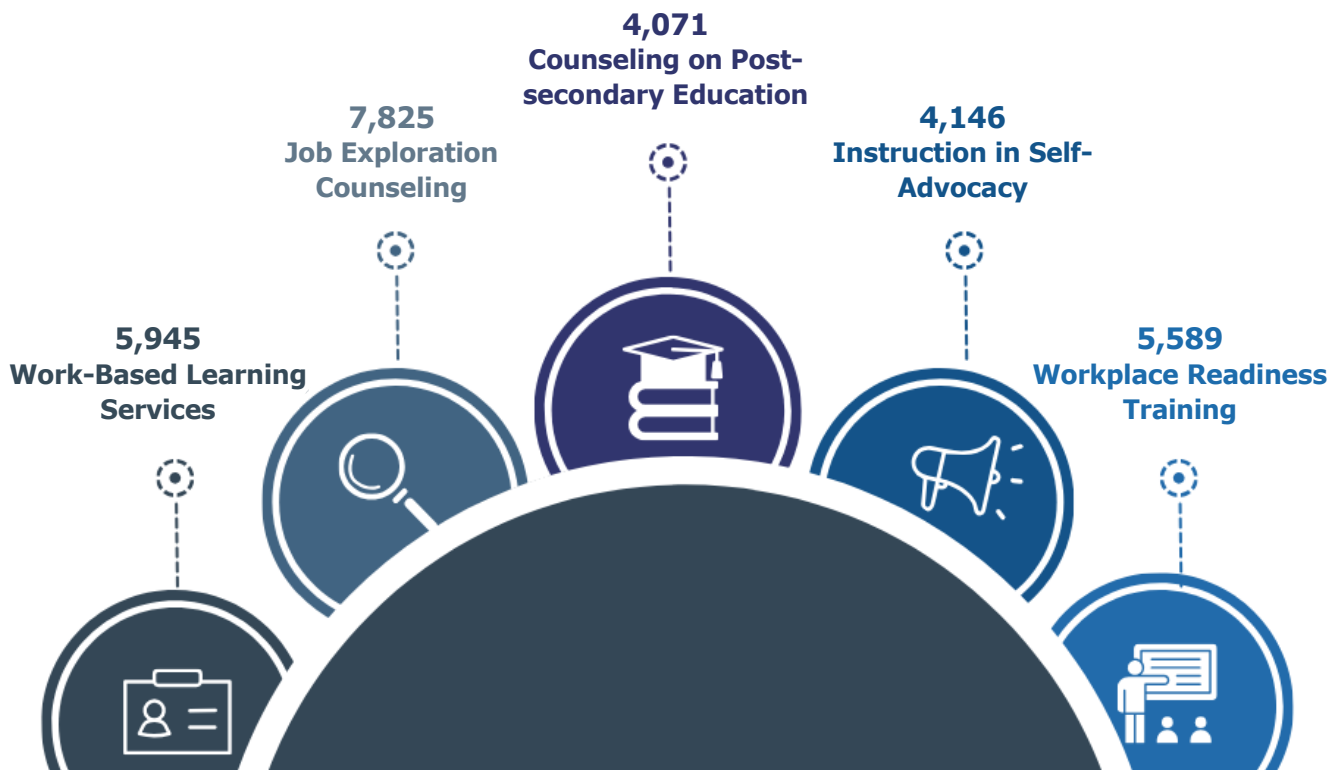


OVR staff conducted **3,819** individual Section 511 counseling sessions.

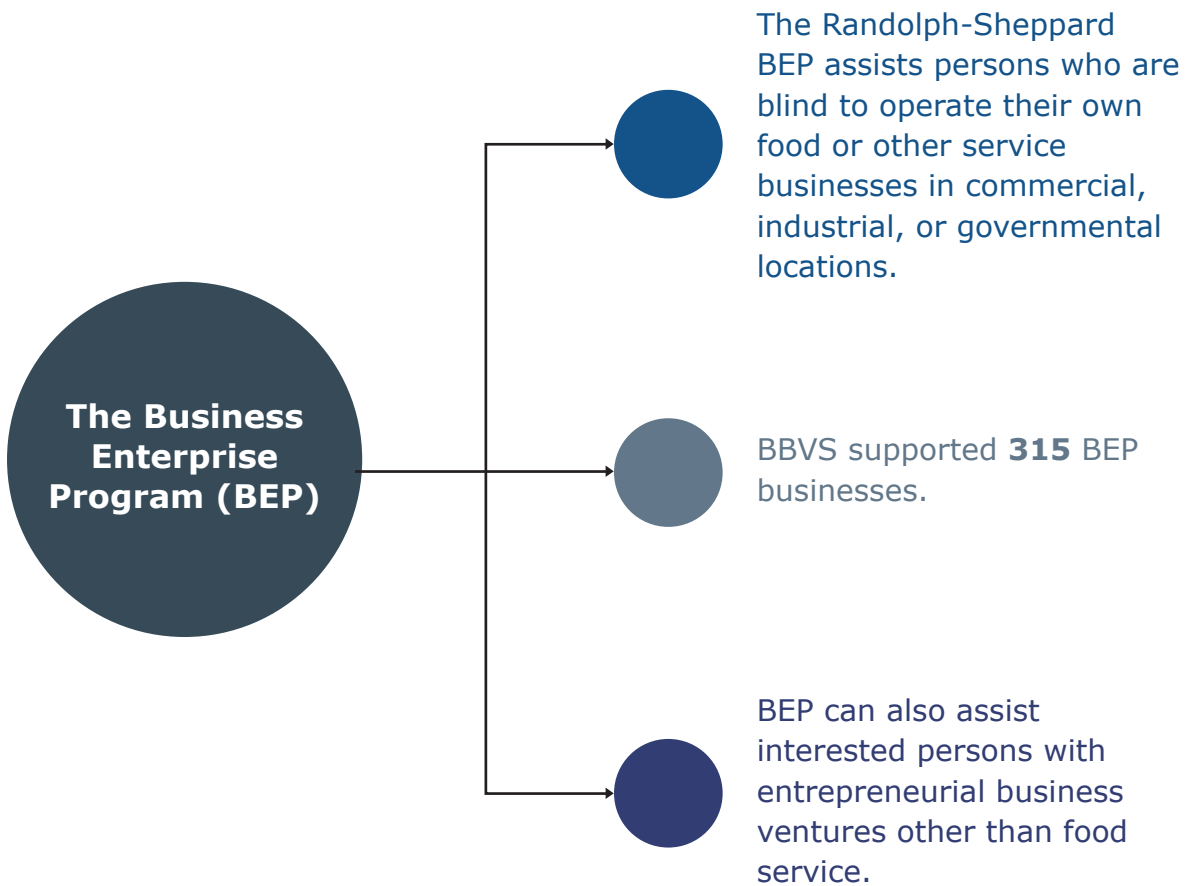


OVR arranged for **851** youth to have paid work experience through the MY Work Program at **165** sites across the Commonwealth.

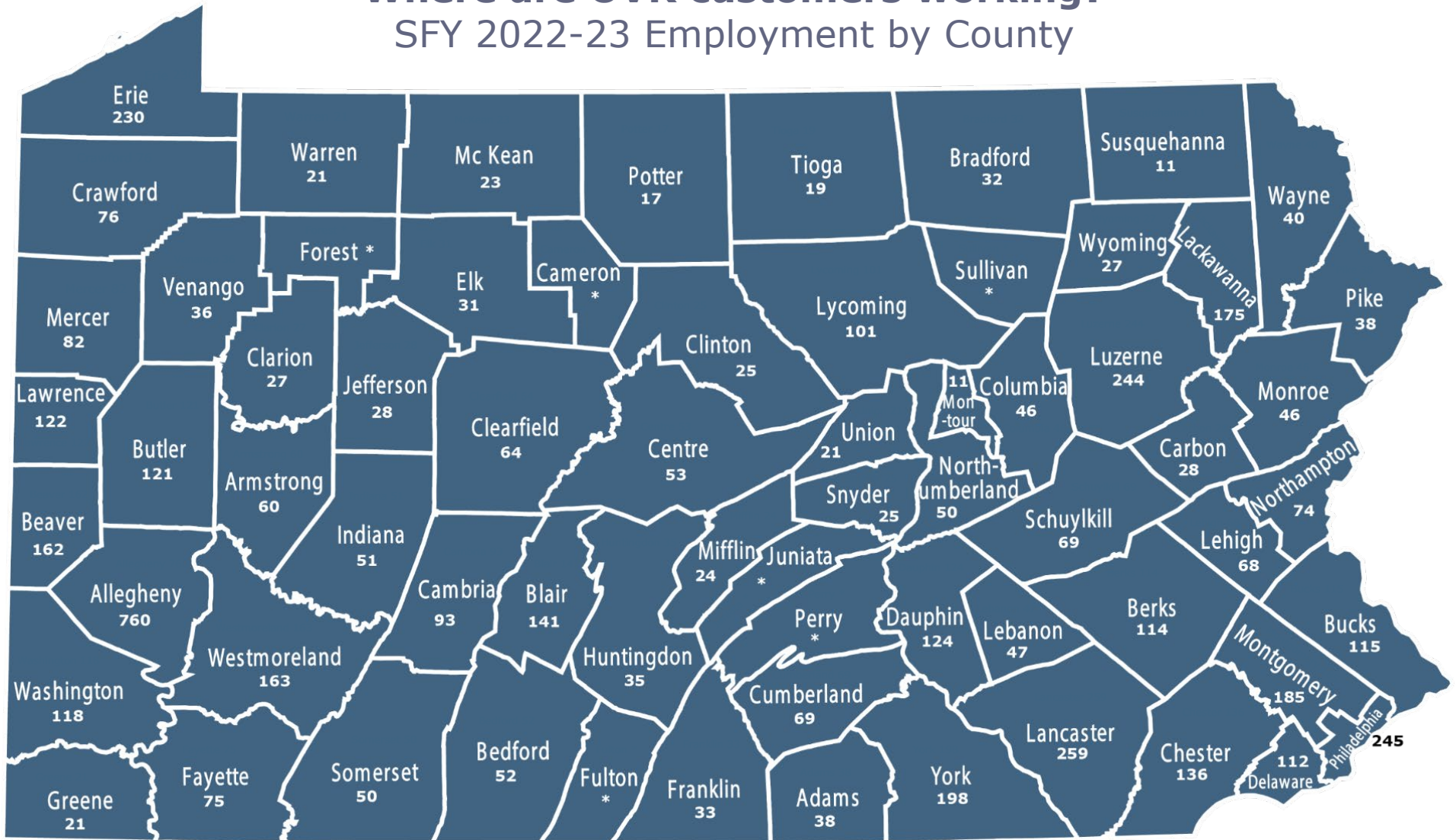
Students who Received Pre-Employment Transition Services



Customers Served in Bureau of Blindness & Visual Services Programs



Where are OVR customers working? SFY 2022-23 Employment by County



*Numbers were not provided for the counties having less than 10 OVR customers employed to protect customers' privacy.

The 36 CFR 361 regulations implementing the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) require that the employment outcomes satisfy the following criteria under the Vocational Rehabilitation program: (1) competitive earnings, (2) integrated location, and (3) opportunities for advancement.

Mickayla Fry

Meet Mickayla Fry, a Cooking Assistant/Kitchen Helper at Rose View Nursing Home and Facility.

Mickayla attended Life Skills classes at Montoursville Area School District and participated in our Williamsport Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services Explore program, a work-based learning experience for students that includes in-school and community work experiences. Mickayla's work experiences included Little League Café, The Williamsport Home Nursing Facility, and Target. It was through these experiences that she discovered her love for culinary arts.

Mickayla learned about our Commonwealth Technical Institute at the Hiram G. Andrews Center (CTI at HGAC) through her high school teacher and OVR. She attended the two week-try out program and later enrolled in the Culinary Assistant Program.

During her time at CTI at HGAC, her culinary instructor Reece Deist shared that Mickayla had an excellent work ethic from day one and became a great peer mentor to others in her program. Mickayla shared that her time at CTI at HGAC gave her the opportunity to live independently for the first time, attend social events, and work in the school's café and kitchen.

After she successfully completed the Culinary Assistant Program, Mickayla worked at Wolf Run Senior Assisted Living, an assisted living facility, for 18 months before finding her current job at a Rose View Nursing Home and Facility that was closer to home with more competitive pay. What she likes best about her job is that she gets to work with elderly residents.

Mickayla currently works 25-40 hours a week, owns her own home, lives independently, has her driver's license, and recently purchased a car.

Her advice for other individuals with disabilities considering employment is to "find what you like or enjoy doing and obtain employment in that field because if you love what you are doing the paycheck is a bonus."

For Mickayla, her "wonderful teachers, OVR, and family, especially my Mom" have helped her overcome barriers and succeed.

Thank you to the following OVR team members for helping Mickayla succeed:

Jennifer O'Brien, Thomas Johns, Galen Miller, and Deanna Trick, VR Counselors; Nicholas Gabriel, Martin Tran, and Maddy Kutz, VR Supervisors; Jason Gies, VR Rehabilitation Manager; Kristy Richardson, VR Specialist; and Ashley Landrum, Psychological Services Associate



Bishnu Khadka

When Bishnu Khadka re-connected with our Erie Bureau of Blindness & Visual Services (BBVS) office, he had worked as a laundry attendant at a hotel and was interested in a training program that would lead to a better career path for him and his family.

Through his hard work and BBVS' assistance, including vision rehabilitation therapy, assistive technology evaluation and recommendations, academic training and tuition, and on-the-job training, he was able to reduce barriers in mobility, self-care, and work tolerance, as well as build his work and communication skills, to secure employment as a Defense Support Officer, making \$16.79/hour at InspiriTec, Inc. Bishnu likes that he can work from home, so he doesn't have to coordinate transportation and can spend more time with his family.



When asked what having a job means to him, Bishnu shared that it is "everything," and he credits both BBVS and his wife with helping him succeed. Speaking about his wife, he shared that "without her, I wouldn't be put in the position I'm in now." He also is grateful for BBVS services stating that "without your support, I wouldn't be here. I honestly don't know where my life would be without BBVS. You guys have helped me so much and my family." Bishnu's advice for other individuals with visual impairments thinking about employment is "to never sell yourself short. I may not be able to see but I can utilize my other senses. I've heard many say just because we cannot see what others can doesn't mean we are not good at working. We are doing better than others without vision impairments, and as long as you're willing to do the work nothing else matters."

Thank you to the following OVR team members for helping Bishnu succeed!

Latoya Mathis and Erica Krasinski, VR Counselors; Shelley Rhodes, Vision Rehabilitation Therapist; Jennifer Radick, VR Specialist; Janet Roach, Fiscal Assistant; Heidi Ehrhart and Renee Pakela, Clerical Assistant 2s; Alecia Beam, Assistant District Administrator; and Casandra Falkenhagen, District Administrator

Gerald (Pat) Ford

Meet Gerald "Pat" Ford, a tip clerk at Dauphin County Courthouse!

Before accomplishing his goal of working in the community in competitive integrated employment (CIE), Pat worked in a sheltered workshop for over 20 years, earning subminimum wage. While employed with the workshop, Pat participated in four career information sessions presented by the OVR Central Region Section 511 Specialist. The sessions provided materials and resources about CIE, as well as guidance on next steps if individuals were interested in pursuing CIE. After these sessions and counseling and guidance with OVR, Pat was able to discuss his desire for CIE and the pros and potential challenges of moving from a sheltered workshop into CIE with respect to his Social Security benefits.

While participating in the OVR Cumberland/Perry MHIDD and Goodwill Project SEARCH program, Pat was able to develop his job skills, determine his interests and abilities, and diversify his skill set through custodial work at MHIDD, youth program preparation work at the Bossler Library, and data entry/mailroom work at the commissioner and treasurer's offices.



After completing his internships at Project Search, Pat participated in supported employment with Goodwill where he worked with job coaches to assist him in finding employment. When he began his job at the Dauphin County Courthouse, he received on-site job coaching to ensure that he had the support needed to learn his job tasks and responsibilities. In addition, Pat received benefits counseling from Goodwill, allowing him and his family to learn about the available work incentives associated with being a social security beneficiary, as well as how best to manage Pat's social security benefits while working.

Pat loves his job and is happy to be working in a competitive integrated setting! In his role as a tip clerk, some of his responsibilities include filing various court-related documents, validating parking, and couriering documents to other courthouse locations. He is a valued member of the staff at the Dauphin County Courthouse and is greatly appreciated by his supervisor and co-workers. Pat's meticulous attention to detail, positive attitude, motivation, and ability to learn quickly and apply what he has learned to his job tasks have proven to be great assets for him in his job. He shared that he likes the independence that he has with his employment, allowing him to earn more income to spend on the things he enjoys, including Knoebel's Amusement Park, Harrisburg Senators and Hershey Bears' games, games for his Nintendo Switch and PS4, and going out to dinner.

Due to his experiences earning subminimum wage, his successful transition into competitive integrated employment, and his determination as a self-advocate, Pat is now serving as an advisor on the InVEST Project Advisory Panel to help others earning subminimum wage transition into competitive integrated employment. As an experienced self-advocate, Pat is giving back and helping others in the process!

Thank you to the following OVR team members for helping Pat succeed:

Kelly Dague, Milissa Welch, and Kelley McKee, VR Supervisors; Caitlin Courogen, Clerical Assistant 2; and Dana Barone, former Section 511 Specialist/current InVEST Project Director

Michael Weston

Michael T. Weston began his journey with OVR in November 2020. Over the years, our Altoona Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services team has assisted him with accessing various services, including vocational guidance and counseling, benefits counseling, physical and mental restoration, and on-the-job training (OJT) for temporary employment at InspiriTec.

When Michael reconnected with our Altoona office in October 2023, he had low self-esteem, increased anxiety related to being unemployed, confusion regarding his vocational goal, and uncertainty about his future.

Michael has always been called “Coach” and has a significant volunteer and work history. While working with his counselor, he was able to discover what he was most passionate about – helping others with disabilities.

His counselor assisted him with job leads, job application submissions when needed, mock interviews, and a referral to the Blair County CareerLink for resume development.

While building his self-esteem and preparing for his career, Michael became aware that he needed to address his depression. He sought out treatment on his own and, while in treatment, was named an Ambassador of the program due to his exceptional attendance and leadership in groups. He is very proud of his accomplishments!

When Michael returned, he applied for a position as an Employment Support Assistant with The Learning Community, helping others on their own paths to success. He began the job through an on-the-job training (OJT) contract and after that ended continued working there. What he likes best about his job, he shared, is “the ability to take people from a low point and provide them with employment to increase their own self-esteem. I am able to support them to help them lead a fuller life, and, in turn, this increases my self-esteem and makes me feel like a part of the community.”

What does having a job mean to him? Michael shared that it “provides me with self-worth as a productive member of society. A job helps me with self-esteem, family relationships, rekindling friendships, and financial independence.”

Michael credits his VR Counselor Suzy Friedenberger as one of the keys to his success. He shared that she “not only helped me find a dream job but her calmness and personality helped me as no other professional. She was compassionate and kind. She went above and beyond to help me.”

Thank you to the following OVR team members for helping Michael succeed:

Suzy Friedenberger, VR Specialist; Janice Werfel, Thomas Blumenthal, Autumn Temple, and Kirsten Shahmoradi, VR Counselors; and Michelle Wright, VR Supervisor



MY Work

- MY Work, which stands for Municipalities + Youth, offers high school students ages 16 – 21 a supported, paid work experience in a municipality or nonprofit in their local communities.
- The paid work experience helps students gain skills so they can be successful in a competitive integrated work environment after graduation.
- In 2021, MY Work expanded statewide.
- In 2023, OVR partnered with an estimated 151 municipalities and nonprofits to provide 851 youth with paid work experiences at 165 sites.



DHH Summer Academy

At our 2023 Summer Academy for Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (DHH SA), 16 high school students spent 10 days at Penn State University's Main campus preparing for college and employment!

Our DHH SA provides students a supportive environment, equipping them with independent living, social-emotional, and self-advocacy skills to help them succeed in their post-secondary education and career goals.

Congratulations to the 16 program graduates! We are so proud of each of you!

Thank you to our partners at the PA Office for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and our OVR team for making this 6th year of the Academy a success!



BBVS Summer Academy

Twenty high school students spent a week at Penn State University's Main campus in June 2023 for our Bureau of Blindness & Visual Services (BBVS) Summer Academy for Students who are Blind or Visually Impaired.

From learning to travel independently with a white cane, practicing independent living strategies, exploring assistive technology, and learning about college accommodation requests and financial literacy, these students gained the skills and strategies they need to succeed in college and, one day, employment.

Congrats to the program graduates! We can't wait to hear about your future successes!

Thank you to our partners at Penn State University, all of the instructors and staff, and our OVR team for making the 2023 BBVS Academy a success!



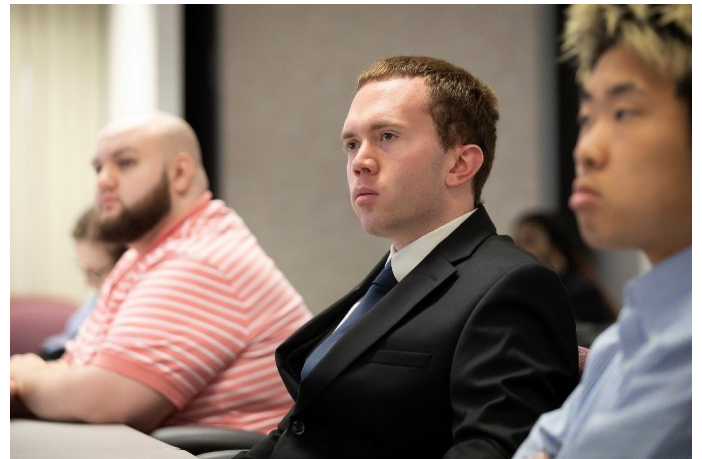
Commonwealth Internship Program

In 2023, we partnered with the Office of Administration to continue our 10-week State Employment Summer Internship Program for college students with disabilities. Through this program, 25 students with disabilities worked at state agencies within the Harrisburg, Johnstown, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh regions and gained hands-on work experience, valuable skills, and support for their career goals.

Join us in celebrating the fourth year of the program that is empowering all Pennsylvanians to succeed and breaking down barriers to ensure everyone can thrive in the workforce.

Thank you to the following partners for helping make this program a success!

The PA Dept. of Agriculture, the PA Dept. of Community and Economic Development, the PA Dept. of Environmental Protection, the PA Dept. of General Services, the PA Dept. of Human Services, the PA Dept. of Corrections, the PA Dept. of Labor & Industry, the PA Office of Administration, the PA Dept. of Education, and the PA Public Utility Commission.



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