



# **2023 Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment**



**Alaska Division of Vocational Rehabilitation**

**Summary of Findings**

**Submitted by the Center for Continuing Education in Rehabilitation (CCER) |  
University of Washington**

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# **Alaska Division of Vocational Rehabilitation**

## **2023 Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment**

### **Purpose**

According to section 101(a)(15) of the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended* by Title IV of the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) a comprehensive assessment of the rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities residing in the state is to be conducted jointly every three years by each state's vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency and State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) to inform the state plan for vocational rehabilitation services.

In response to this mandate and to ensure that adequate efforts are made to serve the diverse needs of people with disabilities residing in Alaska, the Alaska Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (ADVR) contracted with the Center for Continuing Education and Rehabilitation (CCER) at the University of Washington for the purpose of jointly developing and assessing the vocational rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities in Alaska.

The assessment was designed to be responsive to federal regulations and answer important questions about the population eligible for ADVR services and their vocational rehabilitation needs. Information gathered for the assessment will guide ADVR in its strategic plan and goal development for the next three fiscal years. In particular, the assessment and report are required to address the needs of (1) Individuals with the most significant disabilities; (2) Individuals with disabilities who are minorities; (3) Individuals who are unserved or underserved; and (4) Students and youth with disabilities. In addition, the assessment and report address the vocational rehabilitation service needs of individuals with disabilities served through other components of the statewide workforce investment system as identified by



those individuals and personnel assisting those individuals through the components of the system. This shall include the needs of businesses in recruiting, hiring, accommodating, and retaining individuals with disabilities. Finally, the assessment and report address the need to establish, develop, or improve community rehabilitation programs within the State of Alaska.

### **Description of Needs Assessment Process**

ADVR conducted a comprehensive assessment of the rehabilitation needs of persons with disabilities in Alaska. At the request of the ADVR, CCER assisted in the analyses of the data collected by ADVR. The purpose of the assessment was to provide information on met and unmet needs to incorporate into the ADVR state plan as well as in the strategic planning and quality assurance activities of the agency. This report describes the methods used and results of this research.

The ADVR needs assessment was designed in accordance with the VR Needs Assessment Guide (2009) published by the Rehabilitation Services Administration and involved sequential phases of data collection and analysis as follows:

- A variety of existing demographic and case service data relevant to individuals with disabilities was analyzed.
- Electronic surveys were developed and administered with ADVR customers, Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP) partners, and employers.
- Focus groups were conducted by ADVR with a variety of stakeholders (including staff). Participants were identified as knowledgeable about the needs of individuals with disabilities in the state including representatives of organizations that provide services to potential or current customers of ADVR.

- Key informant interviews were conducted with additional stakeholders identified by ADVR as knowledgeable about the needs of individuals with disabilities in the state.
- The results of the surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews were analyzed by the CCER research team.

This phased approach was designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data to describe in breadth and depth the VR needs of people with disabilities in the state. The use of multiple data collection methods strengthens the validity of the needs assessment findings. Thus, the strengths of the methodology used in the ADVR needs assessment are 1) the triangulation of data from different sources, 2) the utilization of multiple methods of data collection, and 3) the integration of quantitative and qualitative data throughout the needs assessment process.

ADVR conducted the needs assessment to identify the current and changing vocational rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities in the State of Alaska. Input was solicited from a broad spectrum of stakeholders including current customers, key informants, and ADVR staff. The data that appear in this report are relevant to the following activities:

- projecting needed services and redeployment of services,
- identifying common and unique needs of specific sub-populations,
- identifying perceived gaps in vocational rehabilitation services, and
- providing data and a rationale for the development of the state plan and amendments to the plan.

## Limitations

All research methods are subject to limitations; therefore, it is important to highlight some of the methodological issues that may limit the ability to generalize these needs assessment findings to the population of people with disabilities in Alaska.

First, the existing data utilized in this report were not originally collected to identify the rehabilitation needs of people with disabilities in Alaska; as such, the analysis based upon secondary data is speculative and the conclusions drawn are tentative. The data from these sources are often presented as estimates. Many of these estimates have been drawn from small sample sizes and may have substantial margins of error. In addition, the definitions of disability vary across data sources. Some of the approaches used to define disability by these data sources included diagnosis based, function based, and service based. Readers are encouraged to consider their knowledge of state and systematic factors impacting the vocational rehabilitation of people with disabilities in Alaska when interpreting the findings presented in this report. The reviews of existing data should also be viewed within the context of the additional activities (surveys, focus groups and key informant interviews) that comprised the needs assessment.

Second, for survey, focus group, and key informant interview methods, there is the potential for bias in the selection of participants. The findings that are reported reflect only the responses of individuals who could be reached and were willing to participate. Additionally, the information gathered from participants may not represent the broader perspectives of all current and potential stakeholders in the ADVR program. Data gathered from client surveys, for example, may reflect only the needs of individuals who are already

recipients of services to the exclusion of those who are not presently served. Similarly, data gathered from the focus groups and key informants represents a sampling of agency partners and staff and may not reflect the full range of Alaska service providers working with individuals who have disabilities. Therefore, although efforts were made to gather information from a variety of stakeholders in the vocational rehabilitation process, it would be presumptuous to conclude with certainty that those who contributed to the surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews constituted a fully representative sample of all the potential stakeholders in the vocational rehabilitation process in the state.

### **Additional Process Details**

The four major activities of this assessment included:

- A review of existing data sources for the purpose of identifying and describing the target population and subpopulations statewide.
- Electronic Surveys with ADVR clients served within the time frame July 1, 2021, through June 30, 2022. A total of 275 surveys were completed.
- Electronic surveys with multiple Alaska CRPs
- Six focus groups were conducted with the following groups or topical area: ADVR managers; deaf and hard of hearing services; blind services; State Rehabilitation Council; Governor's Council on Disability and Special Education; and Field Administrative Services Team members and Counselors
- Six key informant interviews with partner agency representatives

A comparison of the common themes that emerged from the various data sources (focus groups, client and CRP surveys, key informant interviews and population data) was

conducted to validate the information gathered. The results of the surveys and focus groups with clients, staff, and providers were organized into seven categories:

- Barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities
- Services and service provision in addressing the needs of individuals with disabilities in Alaska
- Unserved and underserved populations
- Transition services to transition aged youth
- Partnerships with CRPs, and other agencies/organizations that serve individuals with disabilities
- Provision of services through Alaska Job Center Network to people with disabilities
- Business partnerships

### **Overview of Main Findings**

Upon the completion of the major activities for this Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA), common themes, barriers, and important needs for customers of ADVR have been realized. Results of surveys, focus groups with clients, staff, and providers, and key informant interviews, are summarized into six categories detailed below.

### **Barriers to Employment for Individuals with Disabilities**

When data from the completed surveys, focus groups and key informant interviews was analyzed, 7 themes emerged related to barriers in the following areas: Lack of/Limited Community Resources and Funding, ADVR/System Processes, Participants' Personal Experiences with Disability, Transportation, Employer Issues, Housing/Homelessness, and

Education/Information. Additional detail is included in the Pre-Employment Transition Services and Thematic Analysis sections.

## **Services and Service Provision in Addressing the Needs of Individuals with Disabilities**

### **Living in Alaska**

According to data sources and responses analyzed, the most critical service needs of Alaskans with disabilities were identified. The following service categories emerged across respondent groups as important for ADVR customers to be successful in employment: *Career Exploration, Training and Education, Transportation, Employment Specific Services, Behavioral Health Services, Independent Living Services, and Supported Employment Services.*

In examining service provisions, data sources pointed to ADVR's process that is overly complex, lengthy, and requires too much paperwork resulting in barriers to effectively engage customers. Additionally, the lack of transportation and homelessness challenges both in rural and urban areas seem to influence the delivery of services.

Overall, most respondents indicated that ADVR is an organization with dedicated staff who do a good job with service delivery in ensuring individuals with disabilities in Alaska receive quality services with the current available resources.

### **Unserved and Underserved Populations**

Focus group participants, customers, and key informant interviewees identified unserved and underserved groups of individuals who could benefit from ADVR services. The most common response pointed to the potential to reach many more youth, especially those who are considered at risk or who are involved with the justice system and for individuals who live in very rural and remote areas as being unserved. Next respondents cited the difficult



geographic conditions that exist in much of the State of Alaska, including descriptions of areas that can only be accessed by sea or air. Other potentially unserved or underserved groups that were mentioned by single ADVR respondents included individuals with significant mental health diagnoses, with substance use issues, have developmental disabilities, or are indigenous.

### **Transition Services to Transition Aged Youth**

Respondents to surveys from staff, service providers, educators and parents reported the ADVR's Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) program is strong. They identified a major theme: a lack of employment opportunities for youth in their home communities. In review of Pre-ETS findings, the highest reported need for Alaska youth with disabilities is work readiness (soft skills such as acting professionally, interacting respectfully, being timely, problem solving), independent living (good hygiene, dressing appropriately, using transportation), and job supports (job development and/or coaching).

### **Partnerships with Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs), and Other**

#### **Agencies/Organizations that Serve Individuals with Disabilities**

When responding to questions about CRPs and other service provider partners in Alaska, survey and interview participants identified issues including a lagging economy and lack of financial resources to support service providers and the necessary overhead expenses of small organizations. Another identified problem is the low availability of qualified and trained staff particularly in rural areas, as well as higher employee turnover within CRPs. Additionally, there are issues with limited available resources for supported employment service delivery.

Regarding other community partnerships, key informants responded that ADVR has strong relationships with both the Alaska Job Center Network and with many area employers,

and that ADVR is engaged with business and supports the provisional hiring program with state hiring managers.

### **Business Partnerships**

Most employer respondents identified barriers related to beliefs and attitudes about disabilities. They recommended ADVR serve as a lead organization in providing additional guidance and instruction on how to best interact with persons with disabilities in understanding their disability needs and in providing job skills training, and reasonable accommodations while tackling accommodations biases. Additionally, employers seek assistance from ADVR to address concerns with potential hardship in training a new hire (ADVR customer) given reduced staff numbers and its possible financial impact. As similar issues were also identified in the client survey, consider preparing clients to address employer fears they may encounter in the interview process.

### **Intended Outcome of the CSNA**

It is anticipated that ADVR and the Alaska State Vocational Rehabilitation Committee (AK SVRC) will use this CSNA information in a strategic manner that results in the provision of vocational rehabilitation services designed to address the current needs of individuals with disabilities who seek employment. This information may also assist ADVR in communicating and collaborating with organizations that play a role in serving individuals with disabilities throughout the state.

After comprehensive data collection and analysis, CCER has identified several areas of focus for ADVR and AK SVRC consideration as they move forward with strategic and state planning. These areas of focus include making process improvements, increasing focus on the

client, improving partnerships and collaboration, focusing on staffing and training, and enhancing outreach and employer education. Additional areas of focus are included in the thematic analysis section below.

## **Analysis of Existing Data**

### **Description of Data Sources**

The authors of this report conducted a review of existing data sources for the purpose of identifying and describing ADVR target population and subpopulations statewide. These sources include the following:

- United States Census Bureau 2021 American Community Survey (ACS) which is sent each year to a random sample of over 3.5 million households
- The United States Social Security Administration (SSA) published data December 2021
- ADVR case service data for July 1, 2021, through June 30, 2022

Data from the ACS describes the prevalence of disability in Alaska and the U.S. using various demographic factors. The ACS is a continuous data collection effort conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau used to produce annual estimates at the national, state, and local level on the characteristics of the United States population. It replaced the decennial Census long form and collects information on an annual basis from approximately three million addresses in the SSA data, describing the number of recipients of Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance with disabilities in Alaska.

In addition, the State Fiscal Year 2022 case service data was compared with the available estimates of disability. ADVR data used in this section was for all cases, June 30, 2021, and July 1, 2022.

Apart from the data received from ADVR, the statistics are estimated, which means that the numbers found in a sample are extrapolated to the entire population. The ACS data uses sophisticated statistical techniques that lead to the estimates with great accuracy. However, there are factors that complicate the interpretation of the estimates presented in this report which are an issue for all statistics from population-based surveys. These limitations include (1) statistics are based on a sample and subject to sample variation; (2) statistics based on a sample may not fully represent the total population; (3) respondents to the ACS survey may be different from those not responding.

### **Prevalence of Disability in Alaska and the U.S.**

This section examines the population estimates and the demographic characteristics for individuals who have a disability in Alaska and provides a comparison with national data. In identifying individuals with a disability, the ACS asks six questions of all ages.

1. Is this person deaf or does he/she have serious difficulty hearing? (yes or no)
2. Is this person blind or does he/she have serious difficulty seeing even when wearing glasses? (yes or no)
3. (If the person is 5 years old or older) Because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, does this person have serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions? (yes or no)

4. (If the person is 5 years old or older) Does this person have serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs? (yes or no)
5. (If the person is 5 years old or older) Does this person have difficulty dressing or bathing? (yes or no)
6. (If a person is 15 years old or older) Because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, does this person have difficulty doing errands alone such as visiting a doctor's office or shopping? (yes or no)

According to 2021 ACS estimates, 13.2% of the population reported a disability in Alaska, which is slightly higher than the percentage reported in the U.S (13.0%). As indicated in Table 1.1 the percentage of males with a disability (13.9%) is slightly higher than the corresponding national percentage (12.8%) and the percentage of females with a disability (12.4%) is also slightly lower than the corresponding national percentage (13.6%).

**Table 1.1: Prevalence of Disability by Gender among Civilians Living in the Community for**

**Alaska and the U.S. in 2021**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number in US population w/ disability</b>	<b>Percent in US population w/disability</b>	<b>Number in Alaska population w/ disability</b>	<b>Percent in Alaska population w/ disability</b>
<b>Male</b>	20,538,293	12.8%	49,757	13.9%
<b>Female</b>	21,946,741	13.6%	42,633	12.4%
<b>Total</b>	42,485,034	13.0%	92,390	13.2%

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates*

Table 1.2 compares the prevalence of disability in Alaska and the U.S. by age. The prevalence of disability by age in Alaska is slightly higher than the percentages in the U.S. in all age ranges except the range for ages 5 and under and ages 75 and over. The percentage of

individuals living in Alaska with a disability, ages 18-34 (8.7%) is slightly higher than the U.S. population (7.6%).

**Table 1.2: Prevalence of Disability by Age for the U.S. and Alaska in 2021**

Age	US percent population w/ disability	Number in US population w/disability	Alaska Percent population w/ disability	Number in Alaska w/disability
Ages 5 and under	0.7%	128,966	0.4%	199
Ages 5-17	6.0%	3,270,410	6.2%	8,263
Ages 18-34	7.6%	5,584,573	8.7%	13,908
Ages 35-64	12.5%	15,661,932	14.3%	38,114
Ages 65-74	24.0%	8,013,526	27.1%	18,060
Ages 75+	46.1%	9,825,627	45.5%	13,846
Total	13%	42,485,034	13.2%	92,390

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

**Prevalence of Disability by Race and Ethnicity in Alaska and the U.S.**

Table 1.3 illustrates the prevalence by race/ethnicity and disability in Alaska and the U.S. based on the ACS 2021. The prevalence of disability in Alaska is slightly higher than the U.S. within all racial/ethnic categories, except Asian and Hispanic. The prevalence for Alaskans who identify as Asian is 5.9% compared to the U.S. percent (7.8%). The percentage of Alaskans who identify as Hispanics with a disability (8.7%) is lower than the percentage of Hispanics with a disability in the U.S. (10%). Information for Alaskans who identify as Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander with disabilities is not available.

**Table 1.3: Prevalence of Civilians with Disabilities by Race or Ethnicity for Alaska and the U.S. in 2021**



	Alaska		U.S.	
	Percent of population w/ disability	Number	Percent of population w/ disability	Number
<b>White/Non-Hispanic</b>	14.3%	57,931	14.0%	27,977,988
<b>Black/African American</b>	20.4%	3,872	14.5%	5,625,930
<b>Native Am. or Alaskan Native</b>	16.6%	16,365	15.1%	468,498
<b>Asian</b>	5.9%	2,717	7.8%	1,480,323
<b>Native Hawaiian &amp; Other Pacific Islander</b>	N/A	N/A	12.9%	77,318
<b>Other</b>	13.0%	2,343	9.7%	2,291,341
<b>Hispanic/Latino Origin</b>	8.7%	4,188	10.0%	6,169,016

*Source: United States Census Bureau, 2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates*

### Employment Rates

Table 1.4 compares the employment rates for individuals 18-64 years of age who report a disability in Alaska by race, ethnicity, and gender. The data for Native American/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander is not available from this data source. However, information gathered from the 2000 Census provides information for Native American/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders indicated in Table 1.5. In addition, these tables show the employment gap between individuals with and without disabilities. The employment gap is the difference in percentage points with and without disabilities who are employed.

The employment rates for people with disabilities in Alaska who identify as white is lower than the employment rates in the U.S. The employment gap for non-Hispanic Asians with disabilities living in Alaska (0.9%) is lower for non-Hispanic Asians with disabilities in the U.S. (29.5%). Hispanics with disabilities ages 18 to 64 who are employed (77.4%) compared to

individuals with no disability ages 18 to 64 who are employed (76.3%) is higher in Alaska than in the U.S.

**Table 1.4: Employment Gap - Individuals with Disabilities Ages 18 to 64 years Living in the Community for the United States and Alaska: 2021**

	Employment Rate				Gap (% pts) **	
	Disability		No Disability		AK	US
	Number Employed	Percent	Number Employed	Percent	Percent	Percent
Non-Hispanic White	14,783	44.2%	170,855	77.6%	33.4%	37.2%
Non-Hispanic Black	923	27.4%	6,161	74.8%	47.4%	38.7%
Non-Hispanic Asian	1,092	71.3%	22,556	72.2%	0.9%	29.5%
Non-Hispanic Other	5,753	40.9%	59,663	68.7%	27.84%	33.8%
Hispanic	3,915	77.4%	18,691	76.3%	-1.1%	30.6%
Male	12,172	45.0%	148,533	78.8%	33.8%	39.2%
Female	14,294	47.0%	129,393	70.9%	23.9%	32.6%

Source: Paul, S., Rogers, S., Bach, S., & Houtenville, A. (2023) *Annual Disability Statistics Supplement: 2023*. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability. Note: Authors' calculations using the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Sample, 2021, which is subject to variation.

\*\* The difference in percentage points ages 18 to 64 with and without disabilities who are employed.

As the data for Native Americans/Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders was not available through the Annual Disability Statistics through the Institute on Disability, the 2000 Census data was evaluated for the employment rates for individuals living in the Community for Alaska and U.S. Table 1.5 provides information for these two racial/ethnic groups. The employment gap between individuals who have a disability and those who do not have a disability is significantly higher for Alaska than the U.S. In trying to understand these larger gaps, several factors need consideration, including subsistence lifestyle within the Alaska

Native culture, potential earnings from the Native corporations, and the lack of employment opportunities in remote areas of the state.

In many parts of Alaska, wild food is considered a necessity and a key component of Alaska Native culture. Wild resources are spiritual, cultural, social, and economic necessities. Alaska is the only state where the federal government manages public lands and waters for subsistence -- about 230 million acres, or 60% of the land in the state. ADVR recognizes subsistence as a self-employment outcome.

In Alaska there are 12 Alaska Native Regional Corporations that serve most of the 225 federally recognized Indian communities and villages in Alaska. The regional corporations were created by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), which created Native-owned corporations to provide stewardship of ancestral lands and financial and other resources for Alaska's Native people. Several Corporations have significant financial resources which are shared with their tribal members.

In addition, the lack of work opportunities available in remote/rural areas of Alaska may influence the employment gap for American Indians/Alaska Natives. For example, in a rural village employment opportunities may be limited to a store, school, or post office.

**Table 1.5: Employment Gap - Native American/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian & Other Pacific Island with Disabilities Ages 16 to 64 years Living in the Community for Alaska and the**

**U.S.: 2000**

	Employment Rate Alaska				Gap (% pts) **	
	Disability		No Disability		AK	US
	Number Employed	Percent	Number Employed	Percent		
<b>Native American/Alaska Native</b>	5,192	14.3%	23,929	66.1%	51.8%	32.8%
<b>Native Hawaiian &amp; Other Pacific Islander</b>	153	0.06%	898	51.0%	51.1%	39.5%

Source: Decennial Census, U.S. Census Bureau 2000.

\*\* The difference in percentage points ages 16 to 64 with and without disabilities who are employed.

In looking at employment rates for selected disability groups, Table 1.6, the percentages are slightly higher than the U.S. rates in all selected disability groups. For individuals with a hearing disability ages 18 to 64 the employment rate is 52.5% in Alaska compared to the U.S. (51%). For individuals with a cognitive disability, the employment rate in Alaska, 46.6% compared to 33.6% in the U.S. individuals with a vision disability the employment rate in Alaska is 58.3% compared to 47.9% in the U.S and for those individuals with an ambulatory disability, the employment rate in Alaska is 32.0% compared to the U.S. rate of 26.4%.

**Table 1.6: Employment Rates for Individuals with Hearing, Vision, and Cognitive Disabilities 18-64 in Alaska Living in the Community, 2021**

	Alaska		US	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
<b>With a hearing disability</b>	52.5%	8,489	51%	2,199,414
<b>With a cognitive disability</b>	46.6%	12,130	33.6%	3,282,104
<b>With a vision disability</b>	58.3%	5,296	47.9%	2,013,445
<b>With an ambulatory disability</b>	32.0%	6,285	26.4%	2,358,780

Source: Paul, S., Rogers, S., Bach, S., & Houtenville, A. (2023) Annual Disability Statistics Supplement: 2023. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability. Note:

*Authors' calculations using the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata, 2021, which is subject to variation.*

The ACS collects and reports information on the most prevalent industries and occupations for individuals with and without disabilities. ACS asks respondents about their primary job, and for those individuals who have not worked in the last five years, the most recent job. Industries are categorized based on the North American Industry Classification system (NAICS) which is a publication of the Office of Management and Budget.

Table 1.7 provides a picture of civilians with and without disabilities ages 18-64 for the most prevalent occupations or industry. Data for the Education Services Industry and Manufacturing Industry was not available from this source as the estimate was not available or too few sample observations. The Retail Trade Industry and Office and Administrative Support Occupations are slightly less than individuals with disabilities in the U.S. employed in these occupations, and the percentage of people with disabilities employed in Alaska is significantly higher (20.5%) than those without disabilities working in Alaska (11.4%) and the U.S. rate for people with disabilities (12.2%). The percentages for Sales and related Occupations, Transportation and Material Moving occupations, for people with disabilities working in Alaska are slightly higher than those individuals without disabilities working in Alaska, but similar to the rate for the U.S. In the Management Occupations category, the percentages of individuals with disabilities working in Alaska (8.5%) is lower than those individuals without disabilities (11.2%) but similar to the rate of 8.9% for the U.S.

**Table 1.7: Civilians with and without Disabilities Ages 18-64 Employed by Selected Occupations for Alaska and the U.S., 2021**

	With Disability Alaska		Without Disability Alaska		With Disability US	
	Percent of people /w disability employed	Count	Percent of people w/disability employed	Count	Percent	Count
<b>Education Service Industry</b>	Not Available	Not Available	8.6%	23,864	8.2%	692,935
<b>Manufacturing Industry</b>	Not Available	Not Available	4.4%	12,179	10.3%	880,968
<b>Retail Trade Industry</b>	13.5%	3,583	10.1%	28,131	13.9%	1,156,132
<b>Health Care &amp; Social Assistance Industry</b>	12.9%	3,423	14.4%	39,967	14.7%	1,283,141
<b>Office &amp; Administrative Support Occupations</b>	20.5%	5,421	11.4%	31,564	12.2%	1,072,430
<b>Sales and Related Occupations</b>	9.2%	2,425	6.2%	17,167	9.1%	814,001
<b>Transportation &amp; Material Moving</b>	10.0%	2,649	8.9%	24,857	9.5%	823,789
<b>Management Occupations</b>	8.5%	2,238	11.2%	31,056	8.9%	762,232

Source: Paul, S., Rogers, S., Bach, S., & Houtenville, A. (2023) *Annual Disability Statistics Supplement: 2023*. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability. Note: Authors' calculations using the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata, 2023, which is subject to variation.

## Earnings

As illustrated in Table 1.8, the gap in median earnings for workers with disabilities in Alaska is approximately \$5,434 when compared to those without disabilities. This gap in earnings in Alaska is lower than found in the U.S. which is \$8,185. This data does not include workers who did not work in the last 12 months or who worked less than full-time. As income may be skewed, the earnings are expressed by median earnings.

**Table 1.8: Annual Median Earnings of Full-time Civilian Workers Ages 18-64 for Alaska and the U.S. by Disability Status, 2021**



	No Disability	Disability	GAP (\$)
<b>Alaska</b>	\$59,291	\$53,857	\$5,434
<b>U.S.</b>	\$51,413	\$43,228	\$8,185

Source: Paul, S., Rogers, S., Bach, S., & Houtenville, A. (2023) Annual Disability Statistics Supplement: 2023. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability. Note: Authors' calculations using the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata, 2023, which is subject to sampling variation.

\*Full-time work = 35 hours or more per week for 50 to 52 weeks in the past 12 months.

## Poverty

The ACS collects information from individuals in creating statistics on poverty which is set as a dollar threshold by the U.S. Census Bureau. As shown in Table 1.9, the poverty rate for individuals with disabilities in the State of Alaska (24.0%) is less than the U.S. rates (25.4%); however, the gap between those with and without disabilities is larger in Alaska (14.9%) compared to the U.S. (13.6%).

**Table 1.9: Poverty Rate for Civilians with and without Disabilities Ages 18-64 for Alaska and the U.S., 2021**

	No Disability	Disability	GAP (% pts) *
<b>Alaska</b>	9.1%	24.0%	14.9%
<b>U.S.</b>	11.8%	25.4%	13.6%

Source: Paul, S., Rogers, S., Bach, S., & Houtenville, A. (2023) Annual Disability Statistics Supplement: 2021. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability. Note: Authors' calculations using the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata, 2021, which is subject to sampling variation.

\*The difference in the percentage points of poverty rates between disability and no disability.

## Estimating Unmet Needs: Comparison of Data to Alaska Vocational Rehabilitation Service Provision

This section examines the demographic characteristics of Alaska case service data for those in plan status July 1, 2021, through June 30, 2022, and compares it to population

estimates and demographic characteristics of individuals with disabilities in Alaska. As indicated previously it is important to keep in mind individuals with disabilities may not wish to utilize the services of ADVR or may have disabilities that are not severe enough to warrant ADVR services or may voluntarily be out of the workforce. Furthermore, significant differences between the characteristics of the ADVR clients and the characteristics of the population of people with disabilities in the state indicate that further study beyond this report may be needed.

Estimates made by the U.S. Census in 2021 found 92,390 individuals reported a disability in the State of Alaska. In the period July 1, 2021, through June 30, 2022, ADVR served 1,301 individuals (including youth). Data from Table 1.10 indicates that the percentage of open and closed cases during the period July 1, 2021, through June 30, 2022, identifying as men (53.9%) is higher than the percentage of women served during the same period (46.1%). The percentage of individuals with disabilities in the State of Alaska follows the same pattern (52.8% males and 45.2% females).

**Table 1.10: ADVR Clients and People with Disabilities in Alaska by Gender in 2021**

	ADVR		Alaska	
	Percent of open and closed cases July 1, 2021, through June 30, 2022	Count	Percent of AK population w/disability	Count
<b>Male</b>	53.9%	701	52.8%	49,757
<b>Female</b>	46.1%	599	45.2%	42,633
<b>Total</b>	100%	1,301	100%	99,194

*Source: Based on data from the US Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS 2021) and AK WIOA Statewide Performance Report SFY 2021.*

## Race and Ethnicity

Table 1.11 provides data on the racial and ethnic characteristics of ADVR clients served during the period July 1, 2021, through June 30, 2022, and individuals with disabilities in the State of Alaska, Ages 18-64, 2021. Individuals who identified as white comprise the highest proportion of the ADVR caseload (73%). Individuals who identify as American Indian/Alaska Native constitute a third of the ADVR caseload (23%) which is significantly higher than the ACS estimates percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native with disabilities in Alaska ages 18-64 (15.5%). Individuals who identify as American Indian or Alaska Native may also be served through a Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation Program (TVR).

The percentage of individuals served by ADVR who identify as Native Hawaiian & Other Pacific Island (1.7%) is lower than the percent of the population with a disability ages 18-64 (10.7%).

**Table 1.11: ADVR Clients and People with a Disability Ages 18-64 in the State of Alaska by Race or Ethnicity in 2021**

	ADVR		Alaska	
	Percent of open and closed cases July 1, 2021, through June 30, 2022	Count	Percent of population ages 18-64 w/disability	Count
<b>White</b>	73%	950	12.5%	32,245
<b>Black/African American</b>	12%	115	22.0%	2,789
<b>Native Am. or Alaskan Native</b>	23%	304	15.5%	8,759
<b>Asian</b>	5%	65	5.0%	1,534
<b>Native Hawaiian &amp; Other Pacific Islander</b>	1.7%	22	10.7%	621
<b>Hispanic/Latino</b>	2.2%	29	11.1%	3,082

*Source: Based on data from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS 2021) and ADVR case service data*

## **Geographic Representation**

A customary practice in developing CSNAs is analyzing the disability population at the county level with the agencies' case service data as one indicator of underserved or unmet needs. The U.S. Census uses Congressional Districts rather than counties (as in most other states) in boundary divisions. The terms "Boroughs" and "census areas" are both treated as county-level equivalents by the Census Bureau. Appendix 6 provides a full list of Congressional Districts in Alaska comparing ADVR cases with ACS estimates for people in the state who reported a disability in 2021. However, the geographical nature of Alaska significantly influences this data and needs to be viewed through the context of the challenging geography. Alaska is the largest state in size (Texas, California, and Montana combined) in the U.S., and the most sparsely populated. Approximately one half of the population lives in the Anchorage metropolitan area. Another factor is many Alaska Natives with disabilities may be served through one of the 11 Tribal VR programs, in remote areas of the state. Table 1.12 indicates those Congressional Districts with the highest percentage of ADVR clients.

people spread out of more than 5,200 acres of land with limited access. Almost 42% of the population is American Indian or Alaska Native.

**Table 1.12: VR Clients July 1, 2021, to June 30, 2022, and People with Disabilities in Alaska in Selected Congressional Districts 2021**

	State of Alaska				
	Percent of VR Cases July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022	Count	Percent of population w/ disability	Count	Percent of population w/disability ages 18-64
<b>Anchorage Municipality</b>	34.7%	437	11.7%	32,117	11.5%
<b>Fairbanks North Star Borough</b>	22.7%	285	15.0%	12,885	14.5%
<b>Juneau City &amp; Borough</b>	7.2%%	90	11.5%	3,624	7%
<b>Kenai Peninsula Borough</b>	13.7%	172	15.5%	8,948	12%
<b>Ketchikan Gateway Borough</b>	2.8%	35	15.0%	2,049	11.0%
<b>Matanuska-Susitna Borough</b>	17.0%	214	13%	13,989	12.0%

*Source: Based on data from the US Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS 2020) and ADVR caseload data (2021).*

**Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Benefits**

The data sets used to look at recipients of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Benefits (SSDI) included information from the Social Security Administration (SSA) and the Annual Disability Statistics Compendium 2023. According to SSA data sets, 1.1% of individuals with disabilities 18-64 years in Alaska received Supplemental Security Income

(SSI). In looking at the ADVR caseload data for the period June 1, 2020, through June 30, 2021, 11.5% of clients at application received SSI benefits and at closure 8.1%.

**Table 1.13: ADVR Clients July 1, 2021, thru June 30, 2022, SSI Beneficiaries with Disabilities**

**Ages 18 to 64 in Alaska**

ADVR				Alaska	
Percent at application July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022	Count	Percent at closure July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2021	Count	Percent of resident population ages 18-64 receiving SSI, 2021	Count
11.5%	149	8.1%	105	1.1%	564

Source: Paul, S., Rogers, S., Bach, S., & Houtenville, A. (2023) *Annual Disability Statistics Compendium: 2023* (Table 12.4). Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability. Social Security Administration, 2021, *Annual Statistical Supplement*, Table 7.B1.

Additionally, 2.6% of individuals with disabilities ages 18-64 living in Alaska received SSDI in 2021. In looking at the ADVR caseload data for the period July 1, 2021, through June 30, 2022, 7.2% of clients at application received SSI benefits and at closure 5.1%.

**Table 1.4: ADVR Clients July 1, 2021, through June 30, 2022, and SSDI Beneficiaries Ages 18 to**

**64 in Alaska**

ADVR				Alaska	
Percent at application July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022	Count	Percent at closure July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022	Count	Percent of resident population ages 18-64 receiving SSDI, 2021	Count
7.2%	94	5.1%	67	2.6%	12,023

Source: Paul, S., Rogers, S., Bach, S., & Houtenville, A. (2023) *Annual Disability Statistics Compendium: 2021* (Table 12.5a). Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability. Social Security Administration, 2021, *Annual Statistical Supplement*, Table 8.



## **Pre-Employment Transition Services**

Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) are a specialized set of services provided to youth with disabilities to prepare them to enter post-secondary education or employment from high school. Pre-ETS are:

- Job Exploration Counseling,
- Work-Based Learning Experiences,
- Counseling on Enrollment Opportunities in Post-Secondary Education,
- Workplace Readiness Training and Independent Living, and
- Instruction in Self Advocacy.

Under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (as amended by Title IV of WIOA), ADVR must provide Pre-ETS or make arrangements so that Pre-ETS are provided. To receive these services, the individual must be 14 to 21 years old (or younger if determined appropriate by the transition team), currently enrolled in an educational program (such as high school or college), and eligible or potentially eligible for VR services. According to the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, on October 1, 2021, the Special Education Child Count of individuals aged 14 to 21 was 5609. During the reporting period of July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2022, ADVR provided Pre-ETS to 976 individuals.

During the next three years, ADVR's goal is to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services to at least 1000 students with disabilities annually. Over the last three years, ADVR's average cost of Pre-ETS per student was \$1,523, therefore, ADVR anticipates to expend approximately \$1.523million on required Pre-ETS, utilizing the remaining funds to carry out Authorized Activities.

To determine the VR service needs of youth with disabilities in transition, ADVR solicited input from Pre-ETS staff, service providers, and collaborators, including educators and parents. After their answers to questions given in focus groups, online surveys, and key informant interviews were gathered and sorted, the following themes emerge:

- There is a lack of employment opportunities for youth in their home communities,
- The needs of Alaska’s youth with disabilities align with Pre-ETS (as listed above),
- ADVR’s Pre-ETS program is considered a strength of the agency; and
- There are ways in which ADVR can improve its services to youth.

### **The Needs of Alaska’s Youth with Disabilities**

A Special Education (SPED) Teacher Survey was distributed to 363 Alaska teachers, special education directors, and correspondence school directors in February 2022. Eighty-three respondents reported on the skill needs of students, as well as the barriers that youth face in pursuit of post-secondary goals.

The highest reported skill that Alaska students need in order to be successful in getting and keeping a job is work readiness training and independent living. According to the [Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center \(WINTAC\)](#), these are the skills employees need to have in order to meet employer expectations regarding workplace behavior and conduct. These skills, sometimes called soft skills, include social/interpersonal skills (such as acting professionally, interacting respectfully with others, being timely, and problem-solving), and independent living skills (such as showing good hygiene, dressing appropriately, meeting nutrition needs, and using transportation).

“Motivation, punctuality, respect, listening skills are the skills that my students need in order to be successful in getting and keeping a job.” – SPED Teacher Survey respondent.

“Self-Control and emotional regulation to fit in at a job and act or behave accordingly are the skills that my students need in order to be successful in getting and keeping a job.” – SPED Teacher Survey respondent

In addition to work readiness training and independent living skills, survey responses revealed that Alaska students need job supports (job development and/or coaching) and work experience. While job coaching cannot be provided as a Pre-ETS, an onsite workplace readiness trainer who teaches job tasks can be provided for work-based learning experiences. Per WINTAC, these learning experiences provide students a community workplace setting so they can practice applying the knowledge and skills acquired in school to future work opportunities and activities.

“Job supports such as job coaching is needed for students with multiple disabilities, cognitive impairments, and some students with autism spectrum disorder. Unfortunately, we do not have the staffing to be able to send those students out into the community during the school day with school provided support (teacher or aide).” – SPED Teacher Survey respondent.

**Chart 1: Skills that Alaska’s Students with Disabilities Need to Get and Keep a Job**

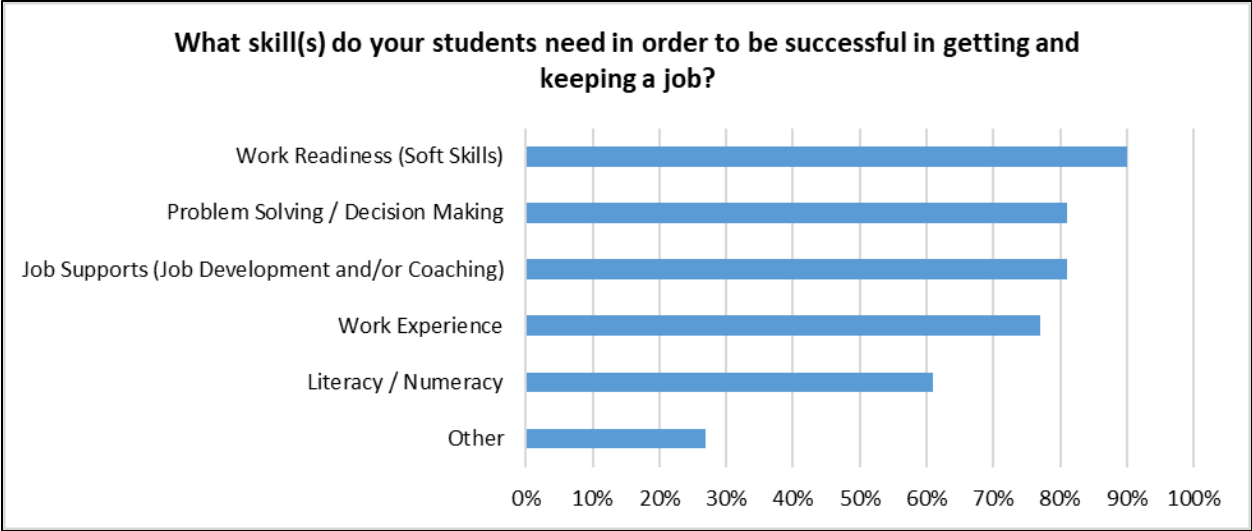


Image description: Bar graph with 5 responses titled What skill(s) do your students need in order to be successful in getting and keeping a job?. Work Readiness (Soft Skills) 90%, Problem Solving / Decision Making on/near 81%, Job Supports (Job Development and/or Coaching) on/near 81%, Work Experience on/near 76%, Literacy / Numeracy on/near 61%, Other on/near 26%.

Source: ADVR’s Special Education Teacher Survey - Employment Opportunities for Students with Disabilities, February 28, 2022.

The survey responses also pointed out that many of Alaska’s youth with disabilities do not have employment opportunities in their home communities, and must leave their communities in order to transition from high school to employment. In fact, 44% of the respondents ranked these opportunities as poor, and reported that on average 23% of their students will leave their communities for vocational goals, such as education, training, or a job.

“Living in rural Alaska often time it is difficult finding positions that our youth can participate in. Reasons being so few jobs that adults do not want to give students an opportunity. Also limited business just a small store, city council and post office if that.” – SPED Teacher Survey respondent

“Access to work environments is the largest barrier for our students with disabilities to become employed. If they do not have a vehicle or cannot drive, there are very few choices for

public transportation. This greatly limits the access to employment as the distances from housing to places of employment is significant.” – SPED Teacher Survey respondent

Regarding their needs in education after high school, the survey revealed barriers that hinder Alaska’s youth from achieving their post-secondary goals. From a list of possible barriers, respondents were asked to select all barriers that they felt were relevant. Top barriers they selected are:

- Lack of family support,
- Transportation obstacles, and
- Unstable living situation.

Other barriers are lack of community resources, difficulty accessing or navigating statewide systems, and lack of existing programs to meet specific disability needs.

“A barrier that affects students’ ability to achieve their postsecondary goals is lack of confidence in independently navigating transportation, statewide systems, or shelter. Confidence could be increased through strategic modeling and guided practice prior to graduation.” – SPED Teacher Survey respondent

**Chart 2: Barriers Alaska’s Students with Disabilities Face when Pursuing Postsecondary Goals**

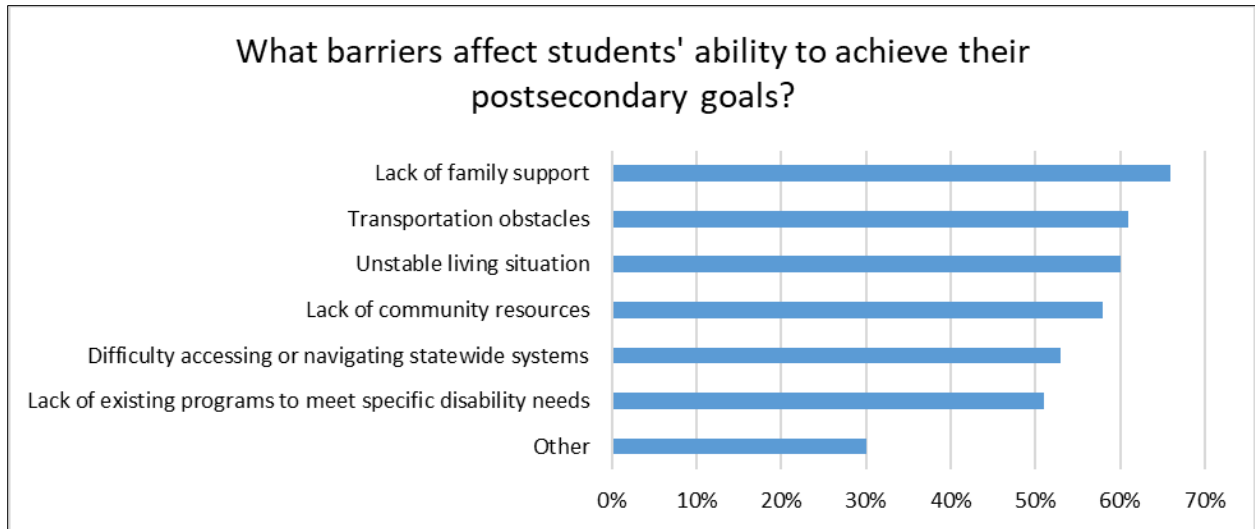


Image description: Bar graph with 7 responses titled What barriers affect students' ability to achieve their postsecondary goals?. Lack of family support on/near 65%, Transportation obstacles on/near 61%, Unstable living situation 60%, Lack of community resources on/near 58%, Difficulty accessing or navigating stateside systems on/near 52%, Lack of existing programs to meet specific disability needs 51%, Other 30%.

Source: ADVR's Special Education Teacher Survey - Employment Opportunities for Students with Disabilities, February 28, 2022.

### The Effectiveness of ADVR's Pre-ETS Program

From the 2022 SPED Teacher survey and multiple focus groups discussions, there is significant qualitative data that attests to the effectiveness of ADVR's Pre-ETS during the reporting period. Respondents commented that Pre-ETS is no longer hampered by the COVID-19 school shutdowns. Furthermore, Zoom teleconferencing, which became out of necessity a major communication method during the COVID-19 pandemic, has made Pre-ETS coordination more efficient between ADVR and education partners.

"[Pre-ETS] kind of took a slide during the pandemic, which was expected, because so many things were shut down with schools, and we had schools opening and closing and things. So that I'd say kind of sort of slid a little bit in the last couple years, but it seems like it's bouncing back again." – Focus group member

“We've improved our work with students. And I think that was something we started working on probably ten years ago, eight to ten years ago anyway. But it's definitely been something that is improving, and I've seen that, and I'm very happy to see that.” – Focus group member

“...we've done a really good job in blind services with Pre-ETS over the last few years. We have better relationships with our school districts. We are continuing to develop and do that network with the blind and visually impaired instructors.” – Focus group member

Several survey and focus group participants named [Project SEARCH](#) and [S'Cool Store](#) as particularly successful elements of ADVR's Pre-ETS. Project SEARCH gives students year-round, regular work, as interns in an integrated setting for minimum wage or higher. S'Cool Store provides students with an introduction to entrepreneurship and small business concepts by guiding them through the process of creating a small, “Pop-Up” business.

“Project SEARCH has been very successful with our transition Next Step program. Huge. They are getting jobs, they are being -- you know, their training has been spotlighted, and I wish that we had other large employers that could copy that, clone that, because I think that it's a win/win for the agency.” – Focus group member

“My opinion, all schools need a S'cool Store.” – SPED Teacher Survey respondent

### **Potential Areas of Improvement for ADVR's Pre-ETS**

Taken together, the ADVR client survey and focus group responses were helpful in identifying ways that ADVR can increase the effectiveness of Pre-ETS to meet the needs of youth in Alaska who have disabilities and vocational goals. Based on the number of mentions, the following three general suggestions stand out among all others:

1. Tell more youth and students with disabilities (and parents) about Pre-ETS,
2. Make Pre-ETS more inclusive of and relatable to youth with disabilities; and
3. Enhance support to ADVR counselors through skill- and morale-building measures.

### ***Tell More Youth and Students with Disabilities (and Parents) about Pre-ETS***

According to the data, ADVR can do more to inform people, especially high school students and graduates and parents, about Pre-ETS. When clients were asked to name people or groups of people with disabilities who might not know about ADVR, eight out of thirty-two respondents (or 25%) stated schools, kids, teens, students, or young adults.

“I'm sure there are many people with chronic illnesses that don't know what they can apply for. Especially younger people, even those coming out of high school but especially young Moms who are isolated early in their adulthood.” – Client survey respondent

“We have had many students in our high school who would have benefited from these services but do not know anything about them.” – Client survey respondent

The input emphasized specific strategies for raising awareness about Pre-ETS, such as audiences to target. At-risk youth and youth in rural areas were called out as those in need of greater Pre-ETS awareness. One focus group member commented that youth who are in foster care in Alaska are not prepared to enter the workforce when they leave the educational system. Another focus group member shared their experience of trying to reach more rural clients for Pre-ETS without having much success.

“I have a ton of rural villages – not villages, or towns that I serve, about 15 in total, and we're just not reaching those people, and especially the high school students that are



graduating and really need that support. And it's because we don't have providers.” – Focus group member

The client survey and focus group discussions offered the most specific ideas to improve outreach efforts, including making announcements on radio, television, and social media and revamping the ADVR website with more inclusive language and less technical jargon. Tips were provided by focus group members on redesigning the VR outreach material so that youth can better connect with it. For example, one focus group member stated, “My biggest pet peeve...is our outreach materials. The folders that we give with the (picture of the) guy in the chair and the kid with Down syndrome and all the words and all the people are just super distracting. When you give somebody promotional material, they want to connect with it, and it's just -- it's not very connectable, it's not very readable. Especially for students, it's just embarrassing to the fact that I just stopped handing them to students. I have them use the resources online. I wish we had just like a clean black or blue folder with some basic information that's accessible. I just don't want to see us use pictures of people anymore.”

Networking and cultivating relationships with partners were additional ideas to improve Pre-ETS outreach. One focus group member recalled the success of a counselor who had visited high schools in person once a month during lunchtime to give presentations to teachers and students. Others advised networking with tribal partners, public schools, home school offices, schools in rural areas that request specific grant funds, and student support services at Alaska universities.

“...if I had time, I would be following up with the schools that requested tech funds to determine if they had clients appropriate for Voc Rehab. So there are so many things I could be

doing in rural Alaska to develop our clientele, but I just don't have the time.” – Focus group member

“...really the key to supporting and expanding that type of success with the schools and with young people, is just the relationships with the schools and knowing who is there. And that's an ongoing challenge, but it does work.” – Focus group member

### ***Make Pre-ETS More Inclusive of and Relatable to Youth with Disabilities***

Focus group members brainstormed ways that more youth could be included in the Pre-ETS program. They named specific groups of youth with disabilities that are being underserved in Pre-ETS, such as youth who are justice-involved. Youth with substance abuse history may get lost in the ADVR system, as one focus group member put it, because they move from city to city, exiting treatment centers where they were first referred to ADVR. Another group, youth who live with their parents, might be excluded from Pre-ETS. A focus group member explained the reason when they said, “I think we're running into another group of individuals, young adults that are coming out of school that still live with their parents, but their parents aren't supporting them anymore. They get to live there, but that's it. They have to pay their own car payments, their own car insurance, their own phone bill. The only thing they don't have is rent, and they don't have resources to move forward with any training or education should they need that.”

Additionally, the focus groups in particular urged ADVR to explore ways to make the VR application process less cumbersome and more efficient for individuals in the Pre-ETS age group. As one focus member stated, “Sometimes I've wished that we had a little bit of a different intake process for people in the high school age group because of that, like between

ages 14 and 18 in particular. So that's one thing I thought of. And I don't know exactly what that would look like perhaps -- it's possible that would look like having more of an Internet-based application process, kind of like we have now with the new application with the Survey Monkey, I like that.”

### ***Enhance Support to ADVR Counselors Through Skill- and Morale-Building Measures***

Comments shared in the CRP survey and in the focus group discussions highlight the importance of having a skilled and encouraged ADVR counselor in the provision of Pre-ETS. Not only must the counselor possess the technical skills in assessment, planning, and service delivery, they must communicate in ways that respect Alaska students’ regional cultures and promote a safe space for students to engage in conversation. According to the feedback, the counselor’s interpersonal skills with students and their parents have significant influence on whether or not a student will continue in a Pre-ETS program and can have an impact on the number of Pre-ETS referrals from a community.

“Our population has experienced a lot of trauma and the DVR process can be triggering for that trauma and emotion as they gather historical information. Having trauma informed care skills would be helpful for counselors and DVR staff.” – Key informant

Another issue raised by the focus groups centers on how counselors relate to Pre-ETS. Two focus group members explained that Pre-ETS cases tend to be more complicated. Counselors spend considerable amounts of time, effort, and resources to provide Pre-ETS, and they are not sufficiently acknowledged for those efforts when case closures are the only measure of success.

“The Pre-ETS has been amazing as far as helping students, but our VRC counselors get no credit for it. And it is a ton of work, and it's a ton of our resources. It's just so annoying when you've done several projects, and your evaluations, that's what you got, two closures, or three...” – Focus group member

## **Thematic Analysis**

### **Research Methodology**

In addition to gathering and analyzing statistical and population data, ADVR also conducted a variety of surveys, focus groups and interviews with key stakeholders to gather information about employment barriers experienced by Alaskans with disabilities, their VR service needs, populations in Alaska who are unserved or underserved, community resource availability, agency strengths and recommendations for agency improvement. A description of these activities and their details follows.

- ADVR conducted six live focus groups with a total of 28 people representing the following groups of agency and community stakeholders. (See Appendix 3 for additional information about the questions presented to group participants.)
  - AK SVRC (2 participants)
  - Professionals serving individuals who are blind and visually impaired (7 participants)
  - Professionals serving individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing (4 participants)
  - Managers within ADVR (5 participants)
  - The Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education (3 participants)

- ADVR's Client Services Group (7 participants)
- ADVR distributed a written survey to approximately 1,150 VR participants and received 275 completed surveys for a response rate of approximately 24%. (See Appendix 1 for additional information about the questions used in the participant surveys.)
- ADVR received 12 written survey responses from various CRP partners. (See Appendix 3 for additional information about the questions used in the CRP surveys).
- Six live key informant interviews were conducted with representatives from entities identified by ADVR as important partners representing the workforce and mental health systems. Interviewees were informed that their input would be documented and aggregated in a final report alongside other collected data to preserve confidentiality. The key informant interview process used a systematically developed set of open-ended questions which were presented to interviewees in a semi-structured interview style by a single interviewer. The interviewer took detailed notes throughout the interviews, but the sessions were not recorded. Upon completion of the interviews, each session's notes were transcribed, and reflexive thematic analysis was applied to the transcriptions. (See Appendix 6 for additional information about the questions used in the key informant interviews).

Although the focus group and interview participants represent a broad range of partners and service providers, it should be noted that some community expertise may be missing from the results and Alaska should consider the results within this context. Reflexive thematic

analysis including iterative review and coding was applied to the focus group transcripts and key informant interviews. This analysis resulted in the identification of common themes that were then compared with data collected from other sources including open ended question responses from the VR participant and CRP surveys conducted by ADVR. In total, responses from 321 surveyed or interviewed individuals (excluding employers) were aggregated and analyzed using these methods. One of the strengths of the process is that this methodology allowed for the synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data and further validated the results contained in this report, leading to the identification of potential action strategies for ADVR.

## **Barriers & Vocational Rehabilitation Service Needs**

### ***Barriers to Employment***

Upon analysis of the various data sources mentioned above in the methodology section, seven main themes emerged when examining the barriers that Alaskans with disabilities encounter when pursuing successful employment in partnership with ADVR.

1) Lack of/Limited Community Resources and Funding - among the various sources of collected information, 35 respondents referenced the need for increased community resources and funding for programs, including ADVR, to directly assist individuals with disabilities. Areas of limited resources included supported employment supports, access to technology and associated training, employment opportunities in rural and remote areas, availability of medical specialist providers such as neuropsychologists, and an overall need for additional CRPs across the state. Also mentioned repeatedly was the need for ADVR and CRPs to address staffing shortages more effectively.

2) ADVR/System Processes – Similarly, 31 of the data sources pointed to ADVR’s process and larger system issues as barriers to engaging effectively and moving toward successful employment. Many of these respondents described ADVR’s process as overly complex, lengthy, and focused on paperwork and oversight rather than the participant’s employment needs. Several respondents indicated that many applicants are daunted by ADVR’s documentation requirements and that ADVR timelines do not align with participants’ needs, circumstances, and expectations. Several respondents pointed to an inconsistency among counselors and offices across the state with regard to relationships with both participants and community partners. One respondent indicated that the agency does not effectively support higher education options for clients.

3) Participants’ Personal Experiences with Disability – At least 9 respondents also highlighted an individual’s personal experience with disability as a common barrier to employment. They described situations in which individuals lack confidence and aren’t aware of what they might be capable of from an employment perspective, experience fear about what it will mean to be working and being “branded” as a person with a disability, or are worried about losing important benefits if they become employed. Several respondents pointed to the need for individuals to be supported in learning skills of self-advocacy, as well as other soft skills that are critical for preparing for and obtaining employment, especially among youth.

4) Transportation – Given the infrastructure in Alaska and the many remote and rural areas across the state, the lack of available transportation in general, and accessible

transportation specifically, was identified by numerous respondents as a considerable barrier to both accessing employment services and effectively engaging in employment.

5) Employer Issues – Many respondents identified barriers relating to the beliefs and attitudes of employers, citing inaccessible and rigorous application processes, lack of accommodation information and resources, ignorance about what people with disabilities can do and generalized fear and stigma.

6) Housing/Homelessness – Data source commenters also described the many barriers related to the lack of access to stable, affordable and accessible housing, without which it is very difficult for participants to address other existing barriers and move toward successful employment.

7) Education/Information Access – the final theme that emerged when analyzing responses focused on the observation that ADVR is not necessarily a well-known resource across the state. It was stated that the general public and even many individuals with disabilities do not know what ADVR is or what it does.

### ***Service Needs***

The above-mentioned data sources and responses were also analyzed to identify the most critical service needs of Alaskans with disabilities. The following 7 service categories were identified across respondent groups as most important to being successful in employment.

1) Career Exploration – More than 20 respondents described the importance of conducting comprehensive career exploration and focusing on identifying jobs and careers that “fit” the participant’s unique needs and circumstances. This focuses attention on partnering with individuals to pursue career pathways over “just a job”.



2) Training and Education – The need to obtain education and employment training was identified as important to employment success, especially in the survey responses received from participants. Responses identified training in higher education, job-specific skills, and technology and computers as significant services for Alaskans with disabilities.

3) Transportation – In keeping with the barriers documented in the previous section, transportation supports were pointed to as a significant, necessary service to successfully engage in employment.

4) Employment Specific Services – Numerous respondents emphasized the importance of participants receiving employment specific services such as assistance competing job applications, interviewing skills, placement services, job coaching, and post-employment services.

5) Behavioral Health Services – The provision of behavioral and mental health treatment services and supports was mentioned by numerous respondents as a significant need in the vocational rehabilitation process in Alaska.

6) Independent Living Services – Several respondents pointed out that providing support to individuals to live independently in their communities, including services such as housing support and resources, time-management skills, self-advocacy skills, and other supports for activities of daily living are significantly important to address the whole person's needs when it comes to successful employment.

7) Supported Employment – Finally, multiple data sources identified supported employment services and supports as necessary for many participants to ultimately succeed in employment.

### **Unserved & Underserved**

Focus group participants, clients and key informant interviewees were also asked to identify groups of individuals who could benefit from VR services but who are not accessing them or are not accessing them at a rate that corresponds with their representation in their communities. The most common response pointed to the potential to reach many more youth, especially those who are considered at risk or who have involvement with the justice system. Numerous respondents also identified individuals who live in very rural and remote areas as being unserved or not adequately represented in ADVR service delivery. These respondents cited the difficult geographic conditions that exist in much of the state, including descriptions of areas that can only be accessed by sea or air. The third most common response focused on individuals who are homeless and in poverty, describing difficulties in connecting people to stable and accessible housing. Other groups identified as possibly being unserved or underserved by ADVR included individuals with significant mental health diagnoses, individuals with substance use issues, individuals who are indigenous, individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities, and individuals who are aging/older.

## **Community Resources and Partnerships**

When responding to questions about CRPs and other service provider partners in Alaska, survey and interview participants identified the following issues:

- A lagging economy and lack of financial resources to support service providers and the necessary overhead expenses of small organizations
- Low availability of qualified and trained staff as well as higher employee turnover within CRPs
- Insufficient referrals received from ADVR
- A lack of available resources for long term supports in the area of supported employment service delivery
- A lack of availability of service providers in rural and remote areas

Regarding other community partnerships, key informants responded that ADVR has strong relationships with both the Alaska Job Center Network and with many area employers, and that ADVR is engaged with business and supports the provisional hiring program with state hiring managers.

## **Agency Strengths**

Many individuals who participated in the focus groups, key informant interviews, and surveys also described areas of strength for ADVR. A significant number of respondents pointed to ADVR's hybrid approach to service delivery (both in-person and remote) and innovative use of technology as ways in which the agency is effectively meeting the needs of clients and the

community. The use of technology such as Zoom, SARA (Semi-Autonomous Research Assistant), SharePoint, and online applications were all given as examples of best practice.

Additionally, respondents stated that ADVR is doing a good job of providing Pre-ETS and highlighted their Summer Work Programs as an agency strength. It is interesting to note this strength in relation to the above section where youth were also perceived to be a group of individuals who may be underserved by ADVR. This juxtaposition could signal perception of potential and opportunity to further strengthen services and outcomes for this particular population.

Another important area of strength identified was the quality of counseling services being delivered in Alaska. Respondents pointed to the depth of counseling relationships, the professionalism and educational level of staff, and the strong commitment of ADVR employees as areas to be recognized and celebrated.

The quality of ADVR's community partnerships and collaboration, especially with businesses and their participation and use of "[Job X](#)" as a tool was also highlighted as a strength. Job X is offered statewide and provides employers an opportunity to meet with vocational professionals (including CRPs) and share their business needs. Through Job X, ADVR can learn about the candidates that employers are interested in and the types of jobs that are available. This information is distributed to 100 contacts as well as to those who attend Job X.

Finally, it's important to note that at least 20 of the clients who responded to the written survey took the time and effort to include positive comments about services received or staff with whom they have worked. Below are samples of comments received from both clients and other surveyed or interviewed respondents.

“Very impressed with DVR’s work with adolescents and transition-age youth; ADVR has one of the strongest programs/staff to work with this population.”

“DVR does an excellent job cultivating and partnering with employers and sharing business leads and employer contact information with us. They really do an excellent job at community outreach in this area – just phenomenal.”

“I’m very pleased with everything that the DVR staff has done for me to work toward my new career goals. The entire staff has put their focus on me achieving my goals. Thank you to the staff of DVR for not giving up on me.”

“Overall, DVR has been an absolute delight to work with!”

### **Potential Action Strategies**

Each group of surveyed or interviewed respondents were asked if they had any recommendations for ADVR that would assist them in maximizing effectiveness in fulfilling ADVR’s mission. All of the comments and suggestions received were thematically analyzed and 5 main topic areas emerged. ADVR may want to consider the following areas of potential action strategies as part of its strategic planning process.

1) Process Improvements - among the various sources of collected information, 36 respondents shared suggestions relating to ways in which ADVR could improve its processes. Specific suggestions offered by multiple respondents included:

- Decreasing the amount of time required for a participant to progress from application through eligibility, plan, and service provision in a way that keeps participants more engaged throughout the process

- Making entry into the ADVR system easier to navigate; streamlining the application process by decreasing the amount of information and paperwork required
- Continuing to strengthen and improve the hybrid (in-person and remote) approach to service delivery and the innovative use of technology as part of the process. Several respondents discussed the value of continuing to evolve the online application process.
- Other process improvement ideas included re-developing the financial needs form, setting up milestone payments for CRPs, putting AWARE (case management system) on iPads, and continuing to support the implementation of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) services.

2) Client Focus – Another area of potential improvement mentioned by more than 20 respondents related to strengthening the agency’s focus on client-centered service provision. Ideas that were proposed in this area included:

- Improving the quality and frequency of counselor/client communications
- Ensure clients have the opportunity to fully understand what services are available and what ADVR can do for them, including a focus on strong counseling and supporting the identification of a job goal that effectively meets the client’s individual and circumstantial needs.
- Work to understand and address the client from a holistic perspective and focus on providing a more positive customer experience for clients.

3) Partnerships/Collaboration – The third most mentioned area of potential action centered on the building and strengthening of relationships with various community partners such as CRPs, employers, business partners and other service providers.

Recommendations in this area included:

Providing robust information and training to vendors, contractors and independent service providers about ADVR services, processes, and requirements and working to improve the quality and clarity of communications with those providers.

Developing and strengthening existing partnerships specifically with Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation programs and behavioral health providers across the state.

Reaching out to, and collaborating with, other state VR programs across the country to learn from their experiences and successes in focus areas for Alaska.

Identify and pursue strategies to increase client referrals to CRPs as partners in the VR process and more effectively support CRP partners.

4) Staffing/Training – Numerous participants in the needs assessment process raised suggestions related to increasing and improving ADVR staffing and training activities.

Ideas provided in this area included:

- Increase the number of ADVR staff (especially office and rehabilitation assistants), provide better compensation, and focus efforts on effective staff recruitment and retention.
- Solicit feedback from Rehabilitation Counselors and front-line staff more often.
- Increase the consistency of service delivery practices across counselors and offices around the state.

- Provide staff training and skill development in the areas of trauma-informed care and skills for working effectively with individuals who have serious behavioral health and substance abuse disabilities.

5) Outreach and Employer Education – Multiple interview, focus group, and survey respondents identified the importance of outreaching to and educating the general public, community partners, and employers and businesses about the services provided by ADVR. Specific ideas proposed in this area included:

- Disseminating information with the goal of reducing public perception and stigma around the ability of people with disabilities to be successful in employment.
- Working specifically with employers and small businesses to educate and cultivate relationships that result in more labor-based jobs, the Provisional Hire Program, customized positions for clients, and increased employer understanding of and opportunities for individuals with behavioral health conditions.
- Improved education for clients about the myths surrounding benefit loss upon obtaining or returning to employment.
- Effectively promoting ADVR programs and services through the development of high-quality education and outreach materials.
- Clients who were surveyed identified the following three strategies for increasing ADVR's outreach effectiveness:



1. Promote ADVR programs and services using television and streaming services as well as newspaper and radio advertising.
2. Utilize social media platforms and online advertising mechanisms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and similar applications to share messages about what ADVR does.
3. Outreach by providing brochures and informational messages to area non-profit organizations, doctor's offices, homeless shelters, and transportation providers.

Appendix 2 provides additional information on client ideas and suggestions for effective outreach mechanisms.

## **Employer Survey**

### **Research Methodology**

The survey instrument used for the employer survey was developed by ADVR and the AK SVRC. (See Appendix 5 for additional information about the questions used in the employer survey). The instrument was designed to identify employer needs in hiring individuals with disabilities. Ninety-two employers were sent an electronic survey in May 2022 with a total of 30 employers responding (33% response rate). Participants were informed that their responses were confidential and reported in aggregate format only. The research team followed the standard protocol for analyzing the responses from the participants using thematic analysis as well as addressing the specific questions asked in the survey.

Participants were asked what they thought employers consider a disability. As indicated in Chart 3, the top three responses included (a) utilizing a wheelchair (96.7%). (b) Intellectual

and/or developmental challenges (93.3%); and hard of hearing (83.3%). The responses in the “other” category included speech impediment, back pain, and physical limitations that require physical accommodations to a workspace. Seven individuals (23%) indicated employers consider poverty and advanced age to be a disability. One respondent stated, “I understand that many others qualify, but in terms of the average employer, they may not know details of disability”.

**Chart 3: What Do Employers in Alaska Consider a Disability?**

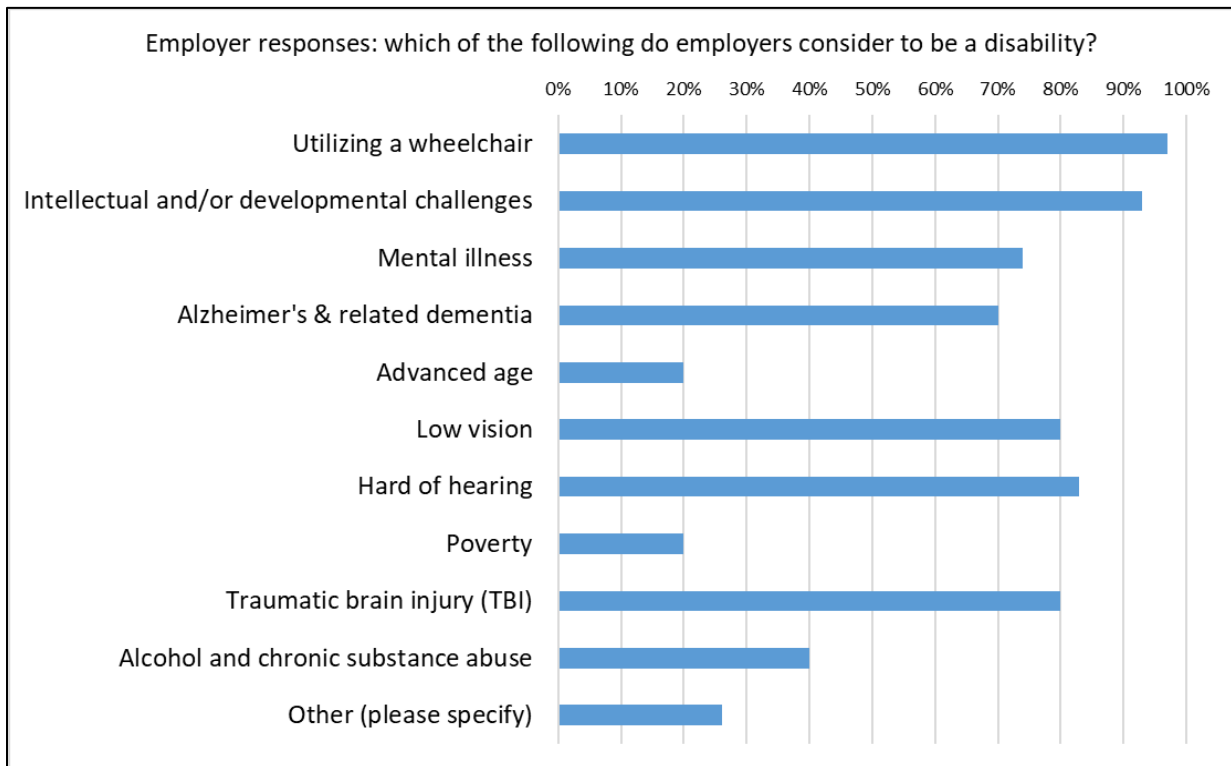


Image description: Bar graph with 11 employer responses titled Employer Responses: which of the following do employers consider to be a disability? Utilizing a wheelchair on/near 96%, Intellectual and/or developmental challenges on/near 93%, Mental illness on/near 74%, Alzheimer’s and related dementia 70%, Advanced age 20%, Low vision 80%, Hard of hearing on/near 82%, Poverty 20%, Traumatic brain injury (TBI) 80%, Alcohol and chronic substance abuse 40%, Other on/near 25%.

Respondents think employers are uncomfortable in hiring someone with a disability. As indicated in Chart 4 “extremely uncomfortable or uncomfortable” accounts for most responses (60% or 18 out of 30 responses.)

**Chart 4: How Comfortable Are Employers in Alaska Hiring Someone with a Disability?**

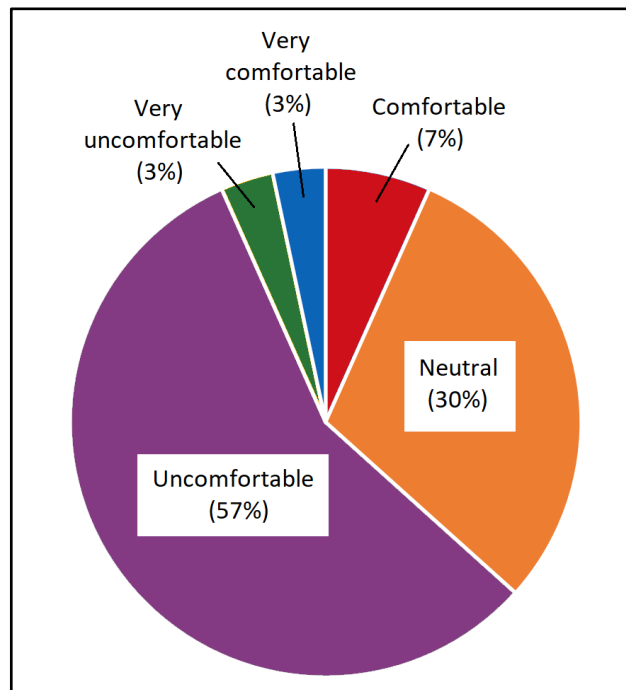


Image description: Pie chart divided into 57% uncomfortable, 30% neutral, 7% comfortable, 3% very comfortable, and 3% very uncomfortable

### **Employer Concerns with Hiring Persons with Disabilities**

Responses varied when employers were asked to identify concerns in hiring persons with disabilities. One concern they expressed is that possible provision of accommodations may hinder hiring. More specifically:

- Most employers, especially smaller businesses, believe they lack capacity to handle accommodations.
- Current staffing shortages leads to “huge challenges” with providing appropriate accommodations, from training to placement.

- A few employers expressed fear in hiring as they perceived accommodations may be expensive.

Another concern expressed by employers may be the fear of hiring persons with disabilities. Namely:

- Fear of the unknown and fear of how to interact with a person with disability
- Worry about costs that could hinder the company's performance
- Lack of comfort in understanding the needs of persons with disabilities and concern about offending the person
- Employers thoughts and biases and discomfort in hiring a person with a disability

Finally, the employers shared that there can be a perception of limited resources available to hire persons with disabilities. In other words, some employers may feel that staff shortages across the board may lead to reduced help and patience in training persons with disabilities.

### **Employer Descriptions of Hiring Persons with Disabilities and First Day on the Job**

Respondents were asked to describe the process of hiring a person with a disability and their experience with the individual's first day on the job. Several respondents indicated that the hiring process was the same as with any new hire. A few employer comments are as follows:

- "We identified the disability in the interview questions, were able to ask what accommodations would be needed and worked to ensure that was set up for the employee's first day. The first day was spent ensuring they had what they needed."

- “I work for an organization who is required to hire 50% of their staff with disabilities. First off, I learned how the person prefers to be supervised. If they disclosed their need for accommodations, it was discussed in advance. Their first day on the job was competing paperwork and completing orientation process. It was good, as a manager their learning style was captured and a mutual understanding for communication was established.”
- “Most of my employees have disabilities. Some have worked fabulously; some have had partial success, and some failed. One individual had a serious undisclosed hearing problem that made her job near impossible.”

### **Employer Opinion on How Well New Hires with Disabilities Fit with the Business**

Seventy-six percent of respondents in the employer survey indicated that the individual hired was a good fit for the business. Table 2.1 indicates that out of 21 responses, 76% of the respondents fit well or very well.

**Table 2.1: How Did the Individual Work Out for the Business?**

<b>Employer rating</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Very Poor Fit	1	4.76%
Poor Fit	0	0
Neutral Addition	4	19.05%
Fit Well	10	47.62%
Fit Very Well	6	28.57%
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>100%</b>

A few comments from respondents provide context for the numbers in the above table.

- “We had great luck - we worked with the person to get what they needed. In some cases, it was super easy - like for our person who was blind/visually impaired -

simply putting a rubber band on the creamer bottle so they could tell the difference between it and the sugar.”

- “For the first few months the individual fit in great. Within the first year, the accommodations began affecting the requirements of the job, and although multiple attempts were made to provide additional accommodations, the individual's requests took a significant amount of time to research, make a determination, and respond. After approximately 3 months into 2022, the individual chose to resign stating they did not feel it was a good fit.”
- “Although it took a year+, we were able to find a way to communicate with each other in order to work well together. They continue to be an excellent staff member.”

### **Employers’ Comments Regarding Barriers to Hiring an Individual with a Disability**

Respondents were asked what they thought employers see as barriers in hiring an individual with a disability. Table 2.2 displays the responses in percentages of the 25 employers who responded. Note respondents were asked to check all that applied. The highest five (5) barriers identified included concerns about additional supervision needed, loss of productivity, concerns that the individual does not possess the necessary skills and/or training for the job, how to handle the situation if the employee does not work out, and concern about individual safety.

**Table 2.2: Employers' Thoughts on Hiring an Individual with a Disability**

Response	Count	Percentage
No barriers encountered	1	4.0%
Concerns regarding increased costs	9	36.0%
Concerns regarding additional supervision	17	68.0%
Concerns regarding loss of productivity	18	72.0%
Concerns that the individual does not possess the necessary skills and/or training for the job	15	60.0%
Concerns regarding how to handle the situation if the employee does not work out.	14	56.0%
Concerns about the attitudes of other employees and co-workers toward people with disabilities	8	32.0%
Unfamiliarity with reasonable accommodations	11	44.0%
Concern about individual safety	14	56.0%
Unsure where to post jobs to best recruit individual with disabilities	7	28.0%
My business has not encountered any barriers to hiring individuals with disabilities	6	24.0%
Other (Please Specify)	3	12.0%

Employers' comments included the following:

- “Even with the expertise offered, there are times organizations fail with hiring, training and retaining employees who are both disabled and typical. The offset for most businesses are checked above considering my own interactions with potential community employers. Barriers and challenges are noted and seen.”
- “It seems there is still some antiquated ‘fear’ associated with hiring individuals with disabilities, and one fear may still be the idea that a disabled individual may not naturally or be able to learn to represent the ‘brand’ or the ‘face’ of their organization in a traditional way.”

With 25 out of 30 employers responding, 80% indicated they were not a federal contractor. Two individuals indicated they were unsure. One individual indicated they had met the 7% utilization goal put forth by Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act. The other two

individuals who indicated they were a federal contractor were unsure whether they had met the goal.

### **Employers' Views on the Employability of Persons with Disabilities**

The final employer survey question focused on how employers' views on the employability of individuals with disabilities. With 24 employers responding to this question, 33.3% indicated most individuals can be employed regardless of disability; 54.2% indicated some individuals can be employed; and 17% that very few individuals can be employed regardless of disability.

### **Final Survey Comments from Employers**

A few closing comments from employers follow:

- “Grateful that ADVR is in collaboration with their communities and regions surrounding Alaska.”
- “I feel it is important to highlight skills and competencies as well as any learned or educational highlights.”
- “The process that DVR has is slow and cumbersome. The employers have not had access to the people signed up with DVR.”
- “Increasing the length of On The Job Trainings and other services. They should be based on an individual’s disability and level of functionality. If they need a longer period of time to learn their job tasks and work processes to help them get a good work routine established, their service contract with ADVR should reflect that. It has been my experience that this is not always the case and sometimes it will put pressure on the CRP to make things happen quicker than is appropriate for the



individual being served. This could be setting the client up for eventual failure in their job placement.”

- “There is a risk/reward with hiring people with disabilities. I have had extreme successes and extreme failures. My most recent failure does not cloud the previous successes within our organization.”

### **Summary of the ADVR Employer Survey**

Most employer survey respondents were concerned about hiring persons with disabilities and listed the following main reasons:

- Admit misunderstanding of what having a disability means
- Discomfort and fear for reasons such as uncertainty with how to interact with the person, in understanding their disability needs, and with self-reported biases
- Belief they lack the capacity to handle a person with disability needing any accommodations that can be risky and/or expensive
- Worry that staff shortages across the board have led to reduced personnel resulting in hardship to take on additional training needed when hiring a person with disability
- Additional supervision may be needed and have financial impact
- Fear of loss of productivity or lack of needed skills

On a brighter note, employers who reported successful hiring of persons with disabilities claimed the hiring process was the same as with any new hire. In part, they contributed the successful hire to applicants who disclosed their accommodation needs in the interview process, so that the accommodations were set up for the new employee’s first day.

Additionally, employers who worked with a new hire established a mutual understanding of their learning and communication styles that lead to job success. When newly hired persons with disability did not disclose their accommodation needs, employers discovered problems and even failure with job performance.

### **Considerations**

The agency may consider the formation of an “Employer Outreach Task Force” to address employer concerns expressed in this survey. This task force may be composed of ADVR staff, counselors, employers, job placement specialists, Pre-ETS personnel, CRP’s, Alaska Workforce Investment Board (AWIB) staff, an SVRC member from the Assistive Technology (AT) subcommittee, and others as deemed appropriate. The task force may develop an action plan to respond to employer respondent concerns and identify steps to success when hiring customers of ADVR. Action steps might include additional job coach training, educating employers on the benefits of hiring persons with disability including addressing employer biases, fears, and accommodation concerns. Task force membership shall include employers who have experienced success with hiring persons with disabilities.

## Appendix 1: Client Survey Instrument

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. It will help us understand your experience with Alaska Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services and use what we learn to improve your experience.

This survey will take about 5 minutes or less and is anonymous, but you can provide us with your contact information if you want.

We appreciate your time,  
Alaska Division of Vocational Rehabilitation

Where in the Vocational Rehabilitation process are you now?

- I filled out an application and am waiting for a response.
- My counselor is still determining if I am eligible.
- I got my eligibility letter, and I am planning my employment goal with my counselor.
- I decided on an employment goal and am being provided services.
- I am most or all of the way through my Plan and am looking for/already found a job.
- I don't know where I am at in the process.

How much time passed between the first time you contacted VR to when you got an appointment with a VR counselor?

7-2 weeks; 2-3 weeks; 3-4 weeks; More than a month; I don't know.

Rate your application experience on the website. You may select more than one option.

- It was easy.
- It was somewhat difficult.
- It was difficult.
- It was long.
- I completed only some of it.
- I didn't apply online.

How long ago did you apply?

7-2 weeks; 2-3 weeks; 3-4 weeks; More than a month; I don't know.

### Eligibility Process

The results of the tests I took were described so I could understand them.

Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Disagree; Strongly disagree; N/A

My VR counselor clearly explained how long eligibility process might take.

Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Disagree; Strongly disagree; N/A

Rate your experience with the VR eligibility process.

- Satisfied

- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied

### Developing a Plan

Rate your experience when developing your Individualized Plan for Employment ("Plan") with your VR counselor.

My interests, strengths, abilities, and needs were considered in developing my Plan.  
 Strongly agree;      Somewhat agree;      Disagree;      Strongly disagree;      N/A

I actively participated in the development my Plan.  
 Strongly agree;      Somewhat agree;      Disagree;      Strongly disagree;      N/A

My VR counselor clearly described what services were available to me.  
 Strongly agree;      Somewhat agree;      Disagree;      Strongly disagree;      N/A

My VR counselor helped me to choose an appropriate employment goal.  
 Strongly agree;      Somewhat agree;      Disagree;      Strongly disagree;      N/A

I understood that my Plan will help me get what I need to obtain employment.  
 Strongly agree;      Somewhat agree;      Disagree;      Strongly disagree;      N/A

Overall, I am satisfied how my Individualized Plan for Employment was developed.

- Yes
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- No

### Plan in Service

Rate your experience with the services you received while working on your job goal.  
 Strongly agree;      Somewhat agree;      Disagree;      Strongly disagree;      N/A

My Plan reflects services that meet my specific needs.  
 Strongly agree;      Somewhat agree;      Disagree;      Strongly disagree;      N/A

My Plan helped me get what I need to obtain employment.  
 Strongly agree;      Somewhat agree;      Disagree;      Strongly disagree;      N/A

My VR counselor referred me to other people and partners to work with.  
 Strongly agree;      Somewhat agree;      Disagree;      Strongly disagree;      N/A

I received assistance with practice job interviews.  
 Strongly agree;      Somewhat agree;      Disagree;      Strongly disagree;      N/A

Job opportunities were shared with me.

Strongly agree;      Somewhat agree;      Disagree;      Strongly disagree;      N/A

Rate your satisfaction with services received in your Plan.

- Satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied

## **Employed**

Did you get a job?

- Yes - VR helped me get a job.
- Yes - I got a job on my own.
- No

Rate your experience with getting a job.

My VR counselor prepared me, and I understood what I needed to do.

Strongly agree;      Somewhat agree;      Disagree;      Strongly disagree;      N/A

I got training or had a work experience prepare me for the job.

Strongly agree;      Somewhat agree;      Disagree;      Strongly disagree;      N/A

Rate your satisfaction with your experience of getting a job.

- Satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied

In regards to preparing for work and getting a job, is there anything you needed that you didn't get from Alaska DVR? If so, please, let us know what it is.

- I haven't started receiving services, yet, or I only recently started.
- I have gotten most or all of what I need.
- I have gotten some of what I need.
- I haven't gotten what I need.

Please, explain what you needed that you didn't get from Alaska DVR.

Do you have any feedback or suggestions for improvement for us?

Would you like someone to contact you regarding the feedback or suggestions you provided above?

- Yes
- No

If you would like Alaska DVR to follow-up with you, please give us your contact information. We will have someone reach out to you within two weeks to schedule a time.

Name

Address

Address 2

City/Town

State/Province

ZIP/Postal Code

Email Address

Phone Number

We appreciate you sharing your experience with Alaska DVR. Your valuable feedback helps us constantly improve our services and fulfill our mission to help Alaskans with disabilities get and keep good jobs.

On behalf of Alaska DVR, thank you!

Ending the survey will take you to Alaska DVR website.

**Appendix 2: Ideas for Outreach from the ADVR Client Survey**

<b>Do you have any ideas about how we could tell more people about Alaska DVR Services?</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
Advertising – Television/streaming services, newspaper, radio advertising, signs on public transportation	28
Social media and online advertising (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, etc.)	21
Outreach to area non-profits, homeless shelters, doctor’s offices and provider organizations with information and presentations	15
Word of mouth/share success stories	9
Outreach to education/school partners	7
Put flyers in grocery store bulletin boards, libraries, local churches, and department stores	4
Job fairs	4
Educating other state agencies about DVR	3
Hire someone who can conduct outreach coordination to seek areas where individuals need assistance.	2
Educate employers and businesses	2
Develop/improve DVR website using a less technical and more inclusive language	2
Craigslist	1

### Appendix 3: Community Rehabilitation Program Survey Instrument

Hello Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRP),

Every three years, Alaska Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) must assess the needs of Alaskans with disabilities. The results from the survey will help DVR conduct its triennial Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) report. The CSNA report is vital to DVR. It identifies areas of improvement which then become action items in the Department of Labor and Workforce Development's State Plan and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation's Strategic Plan. Your feedback is important and valued.

1. Approximately, how many referrals does your organization receive from DVR annually?
  - 1-5 referrals
  - 6-10 referrals
  - 11-25 referrals
  - 25+ referrals
  - Other (please specify)
  
2. Can your organization provide services remotely (i.e. via Zoom, GoTo, MS Teams, etc.) across Alaska?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Other (please specify)
  
3. At the time of referral, are you provided adequate information for your organization to effectively initiate services? (check all that apply)
  - Referral form
  - Joint meeting with counselor, CRP, and client
  - Chance to review files
  - Other- indicate information not given that would be helpful
  
4. How quickly is your organization able to initiate services with DVR consumers after a referral from DVR?
  - At referral
  - Within a week
  - Between 1 and 2 weeks
  - Between 2 and 4 weeks
  - More than 4 weeks
  - Other (please specify)
  
5. How quickly do you receive the Authorization for Purchase (AFP) from DVR staff?
  - Within a week of being contacted by DVR
  - Between 1 and 2 weeks after being contacted by DVR
  - More than 2 weeks after being contacted by DVR
  - Other (please specify)



6. Please rate the overall quality of the communication you receive from DVR staff:
- Poor
  - Fair
  - Neutral
  - Good
  - Excellent
  - Other (suggestions for improvement)
7. From the services listed below, indicate which ones your organization considers to be the top 10 barriers to employment (check 10 please)
- Independent living skills training
  - Job retention services
  - Assistive Technology
  - Behavioral Health services
  - Job search assistance
  - Long-term funding as required for Supported Employment
  - Culturally relevant services
  - Career counseling
  - Adequate housing
  - Adequate job opportunities
  - Occupational Skills training
  - On-the-job supports
  - Youth Transition to career and employment opportunities
  - Child care
  - Basic literacy education
  - Other (please specify)
8. Which of the following issues significantly impacts your organization's ability to provide services to individuals with disabilities for DVR (Check all that apply)?
- Lack of available qualified and/or trained staff
  - Lack of available training
  - Rising costs of fixed overhead (fixed) expenses (gas, utilities, rent, etc.)
  - Employee turnover
  - Current COVID-19 Economy
  - Lack of available financial resources (grants, contracts, in-kind payments, etc.)
  - Lack of available resources for Supported Employment long term supports
  - Lack of referrals
  - Increase in consumers with multiple disabilities
  - Incomplete information sharing with multiple disabilities
  - Incomplete information sharing from VR Counselors regarding referrals
  - Delayed receipt of DVR authorizations for services
  - Lack of timely payment for services
  - Other (please specify)
9. Please provide DVR with suggestions on how to improve the referral process and/or any

other areas where we can improve.

10. If you would like to discuss your suggestions for improvement, please provide your contact information below.

## **Appendix 4: Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment Focus Group Survey Instrument**

Every three years, Alaska Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) must conduct an assessment to determine the needs of Alaskans with disabilities in the context of employment. Thank you for being willing to take part in our focus groups. The information we gather helps us to identify areas in need of improvement which then become action items in the Department of Labor and Workforce Development's State Plan and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation's Strategic Plan. Your feedback is important and valued.

The following five questions are the ones we will ask, and therefore, we are providing them in advance to allow focus group participants time to think about what they would like to share. We look forward to hearing your responses.

### **Questions:**

1. There have been significant changes to Vocational Rehabilitation in the last few years. What changes do you see as having the biggest impact on VR in Alaska (good and bad)?
2. If you could change anything about the Vocational Rehabilitation process or services, what would it be?
3. Are there specific groups of individuals that you feel Alaska DVR could improve services to (examples: community, age, economic status, disability type)? What do you believe is preventing Alaska DVR from successfully serving those individuals?
4. What do you see as areas of success for Vocational Rehabilitation in Alaska, and how do you feel those successes can be supported and expanded?
5. Are there any questions we did not ask that you wish we had?

*We will offer a chance for a one-on-one follow-up for any participants who need more time than the scheduled focus-group time allows or who wish to share other thoughts, ideas, or concerns. We appreciate your taking the time to participate.*

## Appendix 5: Employer Survey Instrument

1. Which of the following constitutes a disability? *(check all that apply)*
  - a. Utilizing a wheelchair
  - b. Other physical challenges
  - c. Intellectual/developmental challenges
  - d. Mental illness
  - e. Alzheimer's & related dementia
  - f. Advanced age
  - g. low vision
  - h. hard of hearing
  - i. Poverty
  - j. Traumatic brain injury
  - k. Alcohol and chronic substance abuse
2. How comfortable do you think employers are regarding hiring someone with a disability?
  - a. Very uncomfortable
  - b. Uncomfortable
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Comfortable
  - e. Very comfortable
3. Would you please explain in a few sentences your reasons for selecting the response in the previous question?
4. Have you hired someone with a disability before?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No (Skip to Question 8)
  - c. Unsure (Skip to Question 8)
5. In a few sentences would you describe how this individual's hiring process and how their first day on the job went?
6. How did this individual work out for your business?
  - a. It was a Very Poor Fit for the Business
  - b. It was a Poor Fit for the Business
  - c. It was a Neutral Addition to the Business
  - d. This individual Fit Well into the Business
  - e. This individual Fit Very Well into the Business
7. Would you please explain in a few sentences your reasons for selecting the response in the previous question?
8. What are the barriers to hiring an individual with a disability? *(check all that apply)*
  - a. Concern regarding increased costs
  - b. Concern regarding additional supervision
  - c. Concern regarding loss of productivity
  - d. Concern that the individual does not possess the necessary skills/training for the job

- e. Concern regarding how to handle the situation if the employee does not work out
  - f. Concern about the attitudes of other employees and co-workers towards people with disabilities
  - g. Unfamiliarity with reasonable accommodations
  - h. Concern over individual safety
  - i. Unsure where to post jobs to best recruit individuals with disabilities
  - j. Other
  - k. No barriers encountered
9. Are you a federal contractor?
- a. Yes
  - b. No (Skip logic to Question 11)
  - c. Unsure (Skip logic to Question 11)
10. Has your business met the 7% utilization goal put forward by the Section 503 regulation in the Rehabilitation Act?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Unsure
11. How do you feel about the employability of individuals with disabilities? (*Check all that apply*)
- a. All individuals can be employed regardless of disability
  - b. Most individuals can be employed regardless of disability
  - c. Some individuals can be employed regardless of disability
  - d. Very few individuals with disabilities can be employed
  - e. No individuals with disabilities should be employed

## **Appendix 6: Key Informant Interview**

Hi, this is <interviewer name> with the Center for Continuing Education in Rehabilitation at the University of Washington - thanks so much for taking the time to talk with me today!

We're helping the Alaska Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) conduct a required needs assessment to learn more about the vocational rehabilitation needs of people with disabilities in Alaska and to improve the services DVR provides to them and the community.

Because of your knowledge and relationship with DVR, we wanted to talk with you and gain your perspectives about the needs of individuals with disabilities and how your organization interfaces with DVR and the disability community. We very much appreciate your willingness to participate.

Our interview should take about an hour. We'll go through the questions you were provided, but this is really a conversation. There are no right or wrong answers, and your responses will remain confidential and anonymous. We'll compile your responses with other interviews conducted, as well as other data sources, to provide DVR with a full picture of what employment-related services look like for individuals with disabilities. This will let them know what's going well, and how things can be improved.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

### **General**

1. Please tell me about your organization and briefly describe your duties and service areas.
  - a. How does your organization support or interact with individuals with disabilities?
  - b. How does your organization interface with DVR?

### **Barriers**

- . Please think about any barriers that prevent individuals with disabilities from achieving successful outcomes. These may be personal barriers, family barriers, social barriers, or barriers in the physical environment. In your opinion, what are the top three barriers that prevent individuals with disabilities in Alaska from achieving successful outcomes?
- . What do you think DVR could be doing differently to address some of these barriers?

### **Service Needs & Gaps**

4. What do you think are the top three services most needed by DVR clients to achieve successful employment?
5. How well do you believe DVR engages with their customers (think about remote vs. in-person engagement, language, communication, quality of interactions, timeliness of

services, etc.)?

### **Unserved and Underserved**

6. In your experience, what groups or individuals are not using DVR's services but could benefit from them? (Who is currently unserved?)
7. In your experience, what groups or individuals could benefit more from DVR services? (Who is currently underserved?)
8. Are there any geographic areas you feel are unserved/underserved and why?
9. Are there any racial/ethnic minority groups unserved/underserved and why?
10. Are there any specific disability groups that are unserved/underserved and why?
11. How effective is DVR's outreach to these groups/areas? Do you have any recommendations to improve outreach to them?

### **Transition Youth 24 and Younger, and Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)**

12. What are the greatest needs of transition-aged youth (24 and younger) who have disabilities?
13. How well are DVR and the schools meeting these needs?
14. Are you aware of or have you accessed Pre-ETS for your clients/students?
15. How well is DVR partnering with Alaska schools to serve youth with disabilities?
16. Do you have any recommendations to improve DVR services to youth with disabilities between ages 14 to 24 in Alaska?

### **Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs)**

17. Other than DVR, which programs and organizations are leaders in the state and are effectively providing services to individuals with various disabilities in the following areas?
  - 1) Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities
  - 2) Behavioral Health
  - 3) Substance Abuse
  - 4) Physical/mobility disabilities
  - 5) Traumatic Brain Injury
  - 6) Other specific disability groups
  - 7) Students

18. How could CRPs be better equipped or supported to effectively serve any specific groups or geographic areas?

### **Workforce Partnerships**

19. How well is Workforce meeting the needs of individuals with disabilities?

20. What barriers exist to effective service delivery partnerships between Workforce and DVR? Who or what part of the state is doing it well and why?

21. How could DVR better coordinate with Workforce as a partner to improve the delivery of employment services to individuals with disabilities?

### **Business Partnerships**

22. Do you have any recommendations for DVR on how to improve services to Businesses to engage employers in recruiting and hiring individuals with disabilities?

### **Conclusion**

23. What would you recommend that DVR do as an organization to maximize its effectiveness in fulfilling its mission and transforming lives by assisting individuals with disabilities to fully participate in their communities through meaningful employment?

24. Do you have any suggestions for other people or organizations we should talk with?

25. Finally, what haven't I asked yet that I should have asked? (any additional feedback/comments)



**Appendix 7: Congressional District and Disability, State of Alaska**

Congressional District	% of Population w/disability	Count	% Population w/Disability Ages 18-64
Aleutians East Borough	10.8%	367	4.7%
Aleutians West Census Area	7.5%	372	4.6%
Anchorage Municipality	11.7%	32,117	11.5%
Bethel Census Area	11.5%	2,103	11%
Bristol Bay Borough	15.0%	125	9.2%
Chugach Census Area	12.2%	837	10.6%
Copper River Census Area	15.7%	412	12.2%
Denali Borough	16.4%	348	11.8%
Dillingham Census Area	11.2%	545	9%
Fairbanks North Star Borough	15%	12,885	14.5%
Haines Borough	11%	231	9.9%
Hoonah-Angoon Census Area	17.4%	406	10%
Juneau City and Borough	11.5%	3,624	7%
Kenai Peninsula Borough	15.5%	8,948	12%
Ketchikan Gateway Borough	15.0%	2,049	11%
Kodiak Island Borough	8.7%	1,077	8.3%
Kusilvak Census Area	13.1%	1,094	13.6%
Lake and Peninsula Borough	15.6%	154	12.7%
Matanuska-Susitna Borough	13%	13,989	12%
Nome Census Area	9.4%	929	8.7%
North Slope Borough	11%	1,188	7.4%
Northwest Arctic Borough	9.7%	755	7.7%
Petersburg Borough	21.3%	716	14.7%
Prince of Wales-Hyder Census Area	22.6%	1,329	17.3%
Prince of Wales – Outer Ketchikan Census Area	N/A	N/A	N/A
Sitka City and Borough	13.0%	1,059	8.4%
Skagway Municipality	13.7%	182	6.8%
Skagway-Hoonah-Angoon Census Area	17.4%	284	13.4%
Southeast Fairbanks Census Area	20.1%	1,352	15.5%
Valdez-Cordova Census Area	10.3	929	6.6%
Wade Hampton Census Area	9.9%	763	11%
Wrangel City and Borough	19.8%	424	11.7%
Yakutat City and Borough	8.2%	46	5%
Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area	16.7%	904	14.5%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017-2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

## Appendix 8: Resources/Best Practices

### Pre-Employment Transition Services

- [Pre-Employment Transition Services: A Guide for Collaboration Among State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies and Education Partners \[PDF\]](#)
- [Workplace readiness training to develop social skills and independent living, WINTAC](#)
- [RSA Technical Assistance Circular dated July 11, 2023](#)
- [Section 618 Data and State Disproportionality Reports, Alaska Department of Education and Early Development](#)

### Promising Practices for Remote Service Delivery

- [Effective VR Agency Practices for Remote Service Delivery News \(tacqe.com\)](#)
- [Remote Service Delivery | Promising Practices \(promising-practices.com\)](#)

### Addressing High Staff Turnover

- [Employee Retention Guide: 15 Employee Retention Strategies for 2023 \(quantumworkplace.com\)](#)
- [2022 Employee Engagement Guide \(gallup.com\)](#)

### Reduce Process Barriers

- [Rapid Engagement in Vocational Rehabilitation Module 2 - Training for Counselors \(QM2022-0308\) | VRTAC-QM](#)
- [Rapid Engagement in Vocational Rehabilitation - Module 1 \(QM2022-0304\) \(ii-training.org\)](#)

### Relationships with Partners

- [A Framework for Community Engagement – A Pathway to Competitive Integrated Employment](#)

### Promising Practices in VR

- [RRTC-EBP-VR-Findings Phase-II-Service-Delivery-Practices.pdf \(pegatac.org\)](#)
- [RRTC-EBP-VR-Findings Phase-II-Models-of-Effective-Practice-Policy-and-Procedures.pdf \(pegatac.org\)](#)
- [Program & Performance Quality Management | VRTAC-QM](#)
- [Identifying Best Practices for Long-Term Success in Supported Employment | Published in Rehabilitation Counselors and Educators Journal \(scholasticahq.com\)](#)
- [An analysis of evidence-based best practices in the public vocational rehabilitation program: Gaps, future directions, and recommended steps to move forward | Knowledge Translation for Employment Research Center \(kter.org\)](#)