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Individual success stories are reason to celebrate as National Vocational Rehabilitation Act turns 100; VR continues to help people with disabilities become employed

BISMARCK, N.D. – June marks 100 years since the passage of the Smith-Fess Act of 1920, also referred to as "The National Civilian Vocational Rehabilitation Act," which created the first federally-funded program to assist people with disabilities.

Individual success stories resulting from this investment in vocational rehabilitation are the reason the North Dakota Department of Human Services' Vocational Rehabilitation Division (VR) is celebrating. Last federal fiscal year, the VR team helped 579 North Dakotans with disabilities become employed. They also assisted 3,721 individuals by supporting training, assistive technology and other services to help meet individuals' employment goals.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, VR staff have continued to serve North Dakotans with disabilities by phone and online meetings. Team members have also helped some employers troubleshoot disability accommodation questions for employees who started telecommuting.

"We are available and continue to work with individuals with disabilities who need assistance reaching their goals. If a person has become unemployed because of the pandemic and has a disability, we are available to help," said VR Division Acting Director Robyn Throlson.

She said vision rehabilitation specialists will soon resume making home visit to assess older-blind individuals' unique needs and provide training to help people continue living independently in their homes.

"Our goal is to protect the health of clients and staff members, while ensuring we continue to deliver essential services that help people with disabilities become employed, remain employed and enjoy increased independence," Throlson said.

VR services include vocational counseling and guidance, job placement, assistive technology, vocational training, and pre-employment services offered in conjunction with local schools for transition-age students with disabilities. VR business service specialists are also available to meet with employers to share information about hiring individuals with disabilities and retaining employees. They also work to break down barriers and the stigma about hiring individuals with a disability.

The VR program is 79 percent federally funded. Throlson said VR services add value because for every \$1 spent on VR services, clients earn an average of \$8.25.

For more information about VR services, contact 800-755-2745, 711 (TTY) or visit the website at www.nd.gov/dhs/dvr.

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