The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program represents the best dual-customer service model in the national disability employment policy and practice space today. The commitment and dedication of VR professionals exemplifies the value of highly qualified staff who are able and poised to deliver customer-centered, tailored services that connect people with disabilities with businesses who can benefit from their skills and talents.

As a profession, we intend to continue our leadership in the years to come—and have a clear vision for doing so.

The Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR)-facilitated Vision 2020 initiative celebrates the best of our profession and provides a forum for reflecting on those areas where we can and must use our enthusiasm, expertise and experience to be leaders for change. It is focused on proactive, collaborative strategies that result in innovative solutions—for people with disabilities and their families, for businesses, for communities and for local economies.

Today, VR is driven by a strong commitment to both people with disabilities and businesses. Our unique position at, and thus perspective on, the intersection between disability, workforce development, career readiness and competitive, integrated employment empowers us to lead change by:

- Building Careers and Retaining Talent
- Innovating Solutions
- Customizing Services and Expertise
- Leading and Engaging in Collaborative Strategies

In this edition of *Investing in America* we are pleased to share just a few examples of innovation spearheaded by our nation’s VR programs. As I think you’ll see, our vision for the future is bright: *Today, Tomorrow, Together.*

Stephen A. Wooderson
CEO
CSAVR
Leading Change by...

Work is fundamental to the American identity, both individual and collective. It provides purpose and the opportunity to live an independent, self-directed life. It supports individuals and families, thereby reducing reliance on publicly funded services. Put simply, a strong American workforce is an inclusive workforce, one in which all people, including people with disabilities, who want to work can work—and, if needed, have access to the services and supports to enable them to do so.

Providing these services and supports is the purpose of the nation’s Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs.

Since 1973, it has been federal policy to provide funding to every state under Title I of the Rehabilitation Act to operate statewide, comprehensive, coordinated, effective, efficient and accountable VR programs that provide employment services and supports to individuals with disabilities. In 2014, Title I was amended by Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to strengthen State VR programs as core members of state workforce systems.

Five focus areas illustrate State VR agencies’ commitment to meeting this challenge.

...MEETING THE NEEDS OF INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES AS CUSTOMERS

To enhance employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities, State VR agencies implement a wide array of practices, programs and support services. Reflecting WIOA’s emphasis on provision of pre-employment services for those transitioning from school to postsecondary education and employment, many of these focus on students and youth. Others are helping forge career pathways and job-driven work experience opportunities for adult VR customers, including through rapid engagement. Among these career pathways is entrepreneurship, an option facilitated by drastic changes in technology and the nature of work in recent years. In addition, due to various work incentives and the advent of the Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Act, many State VR agencies have expanded their service menus to include financial literacy for VR customers, especially related to how working impacts benefits.

Q In Focus: Improving Individual Outcomes through Rapid Engagement in Minnesota

Minnesotans with disabilities are benefitting from the VR agency’s innovative “rapid engagement” initiative to improve income and standard of living for recipients of Social Security disability benefits who want to enter or re-enter the workforce.

A collaboration between Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) and the Social Security Administration (SSA), begun in the 1990s, achieved eligibility verification within 10 days, but did not produce improved employment outcomes. In 2015, VRS partnered with the Institute on Community Inclusion (ICI) to implement a quality initiative to improve people’s earned income through rapid engagement. That initiative led VRS, SSA and Minnesota’s
Department of Human Services (DHS) to develop an information-sharing process allowing for quick initial needs assessments related to money and asset development.

Previously it took up to a month for VR to receive information such as the number of months left in a person’s Trial Work Period, next scheduled medical review, dollar amount of benefits and wage history. VR now receives this information in three days or less, and data from DHS about other supports—Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Minnesota Supplemental Assistance and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—takes just two days.

Now presumed eligibility occurs on average in three-and-a-half days, allowing VR counselors to rapidly engage individuals in setting realistic goals based on their unique circumstances. By establishing strong relationships and improved understanding and information exchange among the three agencies, leaders have improved service delivery and met the goal of keeping people engaged and motivated. The result is a clearer, quicker vision for how they can achieve success—today, tomorrow, together.

...RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF BUSINESSES

The expected outcome for individuals with disabilities participating in State VR programs is to enter or retain integrated, competitive employment. To do this, State VR agencies provide a range of services and supports; however, they do not create jobs. Rather, businesses provide work opportunities, just as they do for individuals without disabilities. Thus, to successfully serve individuals with disabilities, State VR agencies have in recent years broadened the definition of who they serve, recognizing and responding to businesses’ needs in tandem to those of individuals—often referred to as the “dual customer” approach. Reflecting this paradigm shift, increased engagement with employers in order to better understand their needs is a central tenet of Title I of the Rehabilitation Act, as Amended by WIOA—and State VR agencies are meeting the charge.
For businesses operating in multiple states, the dual customer approach is facilitated by the CSAVR-managed National Employment Team (NET), a cross-state team of Business Relations Representatives who collaborate, but also function as single points of contact at the state level. Just one example of the merits of this approach is the NET’s partnership with CVS Health.

Through this partnership, which currently spans 30 states, the NET provides job-driven training across a range of workforce needs identified by CVS Health, including retail, distribution, management and pharmacy tech. The overarching goal is not just jobs, but career paths for individuals and long-term retention for the company, and the partnership has resulted in more than 500 hires in the past two years alone. In addition, more than 425 high-school students with disabilities benefited from internships or other work-based learning experiences in 2017.

CVS regional and district managers help ensure all efforts align with skill needs in the areas they oversee. Working together, CVS and VR develop customized training curricula, and VR counselors are trained on the company’s standard application process. Also, mock stores, including several connected with comprehensive rehabilitation centers where they exist, offer hands-on training in both technical tasks and soft skills. New mock stores recently opened in Arkansas, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Kentucky and are in the startup or planning phase in Tennessee, Georgia and Michigan.

In some cases, curricula developed jointly under the partnership have gained recognition as pre-apprenticeship programs that lead to entry into Registered Apprenticeship programs. In fact, in November 2017, CVS announced a goal to hire 5,000 new apprentices by the year 2022 and plans to work closely with the NET to meet it. The strategy is just one more way VR is helping CVS Health build a pipeline of talent to meet its needs—today, tomorrow, together.

...IMPROVING PUBLIC AGENCY COLLABORATION

State VR agencies are required partners in the local American Job Center (AJC) system. Each AJC required partner must, among other things, facilitate access to its services through AJCs, in addition to other appropriate locations. As a component of this “seamless delivery system,” VR plays a complementary role, providing support and expertise to AJCs to ensure physical and programmatic accessibility for individuals with disabilities. In addition, as a separate and distinct program, VR provides direct, comprehensive employment support services to individuals with disabilities who require specialized expertise. This cannot be done in isolation, however. Thus, State VR agencies also collaborate with multiple other public partners (including education, mental health, intellectual and developmental disabilities, and Medicaid agencies) in the leveraging of resources and sharing of expertise.

Q In Focus: Focusing on Financial Empowerment in Virginia

Public partnerships are at the heart of a comprehensive, state-wide initiative spearheaded by Virginia’s Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) to address a long-standing need—financial education and empowerment for people with disabilities.
DARS chose to tackle this issue through several grants, including Career Pathways for Individuals with Disabilities, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's Focus on People with Disabilities' 2017 cohort and Targeted Communities in collaboration with George Washington University. To start, DARS used national experts to develop a vended financial service. It also engaged key partners from multiple public agencies, including the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired and Department of Social Services. Additional partners included local providers of behavioral health and developmental services, a workforce partner from an AJC and a Community Rehabilitation Program also serving as a “Partnership Plus” Employment Network under the Social Security Administration’s Ticket to Work and Self Sufficiency program.

DARS worked with these partners to select and train five “master trainers” to in turn deliver foundational financial literacy training to service providers across Virginia. Thus far, 60 VR counselors and Work Incentive Benefits Specialists have received the training, and efforts are ongoing. Following the training, participants reported significantly increased levels of confidence for engaging in conversations about finances with VR customers and assisting them with related concerns.

In addition to this “train the trainer” initiative, DARS, in partnership with the LEAD Center (a technical assistance center funded by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy under a cooperative agreement with the National Disability Institute) produced a three-part webinar series on financial empowerment strategies. Although developed for DARS staff, these webinars can be used by VR staff in any state to build their capacity to increase the financial confidence and competence of their customers and maximize potential for employment success—today, tomorrow, together.

...COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

To meet the needs of their customers, both individuals and employers, State VR agencies simply cannot succeed without meaningful collaboration and networking with community partners. As noted earlier, this “team approach” must include AJCs and other public agencies. But, it also necessitates engaging the disability community. Community rehabilitation programs, independent living centers, and public and nonprofit disability organizations (such as state rehabilitation councils, protection and advocacy systems, and parent training and information centers) also have an important role to play—and vested interest—in increasing VR’s effectiveness and reach. What’s more, partnerships with such groups reflect policy that all programs, projects and activities under the Rehabilitation Act be carried out in a manner consistent with support for individual and systemic advocacy and community involvement.
In Focus: A “Promising” Approach for Engaging California Youth

California PROMISE (CaPROMISE) clearly illustrates the power of community partnerships. An innovative model demonstration program led and implemented by the California Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) in collaboration with five other state agencies and a host of local-level partners, CaPROMISE provides a highly coordinated suite of services and supports to Supplemental Security Income recipients ages 14-16 and their families. The overarching goal is increased economic self-sufficiency facilitated by improved educational attainment; career exploration and early work experiences; parent and guardian training and education; and financial and benefits planning.

As of January 31, 2018, nearly 1,500 youth were participating in the five-year study, which will ultimately compare their progress against a similarly sized control group. The youth and families in the treatment group have thus far received nearly 110,000 individual interventions from 12 dedicated DOR staff, more than 70 school personnel and community partners, including:

- 20 Local Educational Agencies representing more than 135 school districts
- 16 Family Resource Centers
- 4 Independent Living Centers
- 3 university internship programs in rehabilitation, including the Interwork Institute, San Diego State University

Employment-focused outcomes include:

- 2,489 different work experiences in a wide range of job classifications
- 1,096 youth engaged in at least one work experience, paid or unpaid
- 923 youth engaged in at least one paid work experience (average of $10.48/hour, 12 hours/week)

The “promise” of CaPROMISE lies in leadership; through VR’s efforts to bring many diverse groups to the table and eliminate traditional silos, transition services can be provided using a holistic, individual-focused approach, leading to better outcomes—today, tomorrow, together.
...INFORMING AND SHAPING FEDERAL AND STATE POLICY AND PRACTICE

Given their rich history and experience, State VR agencies clearly bring specialized expertise to the table when it comes to workforce development. Furthermore, lending their voice to the conversation advances their fundamental goals to assist individuals with disabilities to obtain and maintain employment and employers to benefit from the skills they have to offer. Thus, State VR agencies are increasingly working with, and in fact being called upon by, federal and state policymakers to provide input into related public policies and practices. These include not only policies and practices directly related to disability employment, but also those impacting the many employment supports—such housing, transportation and technology—that actually make work possible for all people, including people with disabilities. Such systemic advocacy efforts represent an increasingly important dimension of State VR agencies' critical role in workforce development.

Since July 2017, Abilities Work has assisted with recruitment efforts for more than 400 positions at more than 125 companies seeking to meet their workforce needs with the skills and talents of Floridians with disabilities—today, tomorrow, together.

Q In Focus: Ensuring “Abilities Work” in Florida

Florida’s Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) was a key contributor to the Governor’s Commission on Jobs for Floridians with Disabilities, an advisory group charged with making policy recommendations on how to increase employment and economic independence for Floridians with disabilities. Among the group’s findings was that employers had difficulty finding qualified candidates with disabilities and accessing support to help them succeed once on the job. The recommended policy solution was a single point of contact approach.

DVR, in collaboration with the Department of Economic Opportunity, spearheaded the effort, branded Abilities Work. This initiative scales the concept of CSAVR’s National Employment Team (NET) down to the state level and comprises two components: 1) a disability-focused web portal within the state’s workforce development system’s online career hub, Employ Florida, where employers can post open positions and access resources, and 2) a Help Desk that assists employers to proactively recruit people with disabilities and navigate related services.

In 2017, these two components were fully integrated under VR Business Relations to provide more seamless service delivery. Now, when a VR Business Relations Representative partners with a business seeking workers, the openings are directed to the Help Desk, which processes them. They are then distributed to local VR counselors, who in turn match them, as appropriate, with individuals they serve. All positions are also routed to the Division of Blind Services. If the employer initiates contact with the Help Desk directly, positions are also distributed to DVR, the Division of Blind Services and CareerSource, Florida’s statewide workforce policy and investment board.

Since July 2017, Abilities Work has assisted with recruitment efforts for more than 400 positions at more than 125 companies seeking to meet their workforce needs with the skills and talents of Floridians with disabilities—today, tomorrow, together.
LEADING CHANGE TOGETHER:
NET Business of the Year

KwikTrip Inc.

This year, CSAVR’s National Employment Team (NET) is recognizing convenience store chain Kwik Trip for its cross-state partnership with VR in Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin. This business-led initiative began in 2013 as a strategy to meet a pressing workforce need by hiring people with disabilities.

The impetus for the partnership was the family-owned business’s commitment to exemplary customer service. Kwik Trip realized its ability to deliver on this commitment was sometimes hampered by the range of functions its Guest Services Coworkers had to manage while also being available to serve customers, especially at busy times of the day.

The solution was a new position, the Retail Helper; however, early internally driven efforts to implement it were unsuccessful. Then, Wisconsin’s Division of Vocational Rehabilitation approached the company about serving as a single point of contact to implement a uniform approach to designing and training and recruiting for the position. The partnership provided quick results, and the model was soon replicated in Minnesota and Iowa. (In Iowa, the company operates under the name Kwik Star.)

Today, Retail Helpers in stores across all three states handle a range of duties, such as cleaning, stocking shelves, filling window cleaner at the gas pumps and other general tasks. As a result, Guest Services Coworkers have more time to focus on customer service and even increase revenue through add-on sales.

Currently, roughly half the company’s 634 stores have Retail Helpers. VR counselors help recruit and train for the positions and provide ongoing supports as appropriate, including job coaching. The key is applicant screening to make the right match, which VR does with input from individual Store Leaders. The position was created based on the company’s needs, not any one individual’s, and thus not everyone may be a good fit.
Five years in, the partnership has been a boon not just for recruitment, but also retention. The rate of turnover among Retail Helpers was just 9 percent last year, compared to 45 percent for all part-time employees, said Joalyn Torgerson, Kwik Trip's return-to-work coordinator. What's more, many Retail Helpers have been promoted to Guest Services Coworkers—creating new opportunities for them as well as those hired to take their place.

"Through the partnership with VR, Kwik Trip has been able to hire great talent!"

— JOALYN TORGERSON, RETURN-TO-WORK COORDINATOR/HUMAN RESOURCES — KWI K TRIP, INC.

Minnesota
The Kwik Trip in Hastings, Minnesota, a town situated at the confluence of the Mississippi and St. Croix Rivers, is just one example of the benefits of the company's collaboration with VR via the NET. Over the past three years, Store Leader Derrick Struve has hired three Retail Helpers, two of whom have been promoted to Guest Services Coworkers. One is Lizzy Wright, who started at the store while still in high school. Now in her young 20s and a new mother, Lizzy is a part-time cashier and hopes to eventually attend college and pursue a management career with the company. Another is Edda Kassel, who joined in March 2016 and was promoted within a few months. Kevin Murphy, 29, is the store's newest Retail Helper and thus far “absolutely loves” his job, in part because he earns enough to pay for the pursuits he enjoys outside of work, including photography and riding along in planes at a local flying club.

Wisconsin
A former teacher, Amy Bellomo knows how to drive a team to succeed. It's all about clear communication, setting high expectations and fostering a positive environment in which people can achieve them. Today, as Store Leader at the New Richmond, Wisconsin Kwik Trip, she uses the same strategies to manage and motivate her employees. So, when Amy needed to hire a new team member, she turned to Wisconsin's DVR for help ensuring a smooth process and good fit for her management philosophy. A DVR Business Services Consultant reviewed Amy's skills requirements and facilitated the onboarding of a Retail Helper within two weeks. Now, the employee is an integral part of the store and a favorite of regular guests due to his positive attitude and energy. Amy understands that people with disabilities offer tremendous assets in the workplace; in fact, she was one of Kwik Trip's first Store Leaders to hire and promote a Retail Helper to a Guest Services Coworker.

Iowa
The Kwik Star in Marshalltown, Iowa is the first community-based, integrated workplace in which Julie Propp has ever worked. At almost 60 years old, Julie's previous employment experience was limited to a sheltered workshop. When she expressed interest in working at the Kwik Star, a counselor from Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services admired her self-initiative and helped her access resources and services to achieve that goal, including assistance preparing for the interview. VR then worked with the store to successfully bring Julie on board by providing a job coach to help her learn her duties, meet coworkers and understand who to turn to if she had questions or problems. Julie has now been a valued member of the store's team for two years. "I'm one of their big family at work and get along with everyone. The customers are so nice and friendly to me.” According to Julie's coworkers and customers, it's a reciprocal arrangement.
Leading Change Through a Collective Voice

The Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) is a membership organization comprising the 79 chief administrators of the public vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies that annually serve approximately one million people with disabilities throughout the U.S. These agencies constitute the state partners in the state-federal program of rehabilitation services mandated by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, with the U.S. Department of Education’s Rehabilitation Services Administration serving as the federal partner.

The Vision 2020 initiative represents a reaffirmation on the part of State VR agencies to ensure their programs and services are proactive, respond to the principles of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and serve as models in the disability employment community. It is a strategic planning process through which State VR agency leaders, under the collective umbrella of CSAVR, are working together to assess progress and guide the profession as the system approaches its 100-year anniversary in 2020.