



THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT / THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

Commissioner of Education
President of the University of the State of New York
89 Washington Avenue, Room 111
Albany, New York 12234

E-mail: commissioner@nysed.gov
Twitter: @NYSEDNews
Tel: (518) 474-5844
Fax: (518) 473-4909

**Written Testimony of the New York State Education Department
NYS Senate Standing Committees on Disabilities
NYS Senate Standing Committee on Labor
Hearing on Employment Barriers and Opportunities for Individuals with Disabilities
May 6, 2026**

Good morning, Chair Fahy, Chair Ramos, and members of the State Senate here today. I am Ceylane Meyers-Ruff, Deputy Commissioner of the Office of Special Education and Adult and Career and Continuing Education Services at the New York State Education Department. I bring greetings on behalf of Commissioner Betty Rosa and the New York State Board of Regents. I am joined today by Linda Schramm, the Assistant Commissioner of ACCES-VR. Thank you for inviting me to speak on issues related to employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Adult Career and Continuing Education Services-Vocational Rehabilitation (ACCES-VR) was first created by the federal government in 1920 and assists individuals with disabilities to achieve and maintain employment. Every state has a VR agency which is funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) which is within the U.S. Department of Education. The federal Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) governs vocational rehabilitation services.

An individual with any disability, except for blindness, can apply for ACCES-VR services. ACCES-VR services are provided to individuals diagnosed with mental illness, physical disabilities, development disabilities, chronic health problems and substance abuse. The Commission for the Blind provides VR services to individuals who are blind or visually impaired.

ACCES-VR's offers myriad services including vocational counseling and guidance, assessments and evaluations, rehabilitation technology, vocational training, college supports, supported employment, driver evaluation, home/vehicle modification, interpreter services, transportation, equipment, and more. Services are individualized and specific to each customer's employment goal.

This year, ACCES-VR's total budget is \$225.4 million. We receive \$154.3 million from federal funding which covers staff and all services required under WIOA. In addition, New York State is required to provide a total of \$71 million in matching funds which covers supported employment extended and other vocational rehabilitation services.

ACCES-VR has 24 offices and over 700 staff across the state, including 267 credentialed Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors. ACCES-VR contracts with over 1,280 vendors who provide various vocational rehabilitation services. ACCES-VR also provides services to businesses interested in hiring individuals with disabilities. These services include Americans

with Disabilities Act training, reasonable accommodations training, disability etiquette training and pre-qualifying job candidates. Annually, ACCES-VR serves approximately 88,189 New Yorkers with disabilities.

There is no shortage of collaboration across New York State's disability service and workforce development system. The Department works closely with our partners at the Office for Mental Health (OMH), Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD), the New York State Commission for the Blind (NYSCOB), and the New York State Department of Labor (NYSDOL) All of these agencies in turn work with the Governor's Chief Disability Office and are active on the Employment First Commission, Most Integrated Settings Coordinating Council (MISCC) and Autism Spectrum Disorders Advisory Board.

While all these agencies are focused on increasing employment opportunities for New Yorkers with disabilities, the federal funding sources each agency receives to administer programs in this space determine the type of services agencies provide, eligibility requirements, timelines to receive services, reimbursement rates for providers, educational level of direct support professionals and data collection. This can lead to confusion and frustration as individuals attempt to navigate the system.

The Legislature is a critical partner in supporting New York State's disability service and workforce development system and there are specific areas where legislative action could further strengthen the efforts of state agencies to increase employment opportunities for individuals with New Yorkers. This includes the following:

1. Support the New York State Board of Regents budget request for an additional \$4 million for enhanced support and services for students with disabilities for postsecondary success initiative. The Executive budget proposal reduces funding for this program by \$2 million. We ask that the Legislature restore the \$2 million and provide an additional \$2 million for a total of \$6 million to support this critical program.
2. Provide contractual relief by exempting VR services from State Finance Law Section 112. The Department implements a federal vocational rehabilitation program for individuals with disabilities, which requires the Department to work with individuals to develop potential careers and identify the pathways to acquire the credentials needed for those careers. If the selected career pathway requires college, the Department contracts with an institution of higher education (IHE) to provide the services.

Unfortunately, the state contract process, as required by Section 112 of the State Finance Law, generally takes 8-10 months. That leaves the individual waiting for nearly a year for services to which they are entitled. Some out-of-state colleges decline to participate in New York's somewhat burdensome process at all. This situation violates the timeliness requirements of the federal program, but more importantly, it denies these individuals the ability to make progress according to their plan.

3. Support initiatives that incentivize, rather than penalize employment. Fear of losing benefits is one of the greatest barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities.

While there has been significant efforts to expand the Medicaid Buy-in program, New Yorkers are still at risk of losing other important supports like SNAP, housing assistance and other public benefits when they become employed.

4. Invest in public transportation and paratransit – especially in rural areas. Lack of transportation is also a significant barrier to employment. Much more needs to be done to ensure that New Yorkers with disabilities across the state have access to reliable transportation that enables them to be active in their community. Barriers like non-existent or unreliable public transportation make it difficult if not impossible for individuals with disabilities to travel to jobs.

Every person with a disability who wants employment should be able to work. Our job as public servants is to provide the supports and services needed to assist New Yorkers in achieving their career goals. I applaud the Senate Disability and Labor Committees for convening today's hearing. The New York State Education Department looks forward to partnering with you.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. We would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.