

Jobs program has lots of work to do

State critiques ACCES-VR, which helps people with disabilities get career training

‘ALWAYS ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT’

Nancy Cutler

Rockland/Westchester Journal News | USA TODAY NETWORK Unemployed New Yorkers with disabilities can get intensive career training through a program called ACCES-VR. But a state comptroller’s audit found fault with the speed and specificity of a program designed to help people who often live in poverty.

The state comptroller said the Supported Employment Program is taking too long to develop programs that are too generic and lack good job outcomes for those who too often face chronic unemployment or underemployment.

But the New York State Department of Education, which oversees ACCES-VR, said the comptroller looked at the wrong measures to judge.

State education officials also pointed out

that the comptroller’s review period included the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when unemployment soared for everyone, so it wasn’t a fair gauge of success. The comptroller’s audit covered the period from April 2017 through December 2020.

People with disabilities around the nation struggle to find employment that pays a living wage, with jobless rates more than double the average. People with disabilities often live on poverty wages if they do find employment.

“Can this program be improved? Absolutely. I would say that about any agency that touches a person with disabilities,” said Andrew J. Karhan, director of Disability Workforce Development and New York State Policy

and Legislative Initiatives at Cornell University's Industrial and Labor Relations School.

Cornell provides training to VR counselors and works with some of the vendor agencies that support the program.

ACCES-VR stands for Adult Career and Continuing Education Services-Vocational Rehabilitation. The federally mandated program is under the umbrella of the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act and is funded on the federal and state level. New York's system is considered one of the most successful.

"New York is a shining example of making sure they are putting an investment of counselors, staff from agencies out in the community," said Karhan. There's a complex system of support services for people with varying abilities and needs, he said. "It's a small population of people that VR is intended to serve."

Karhan called the timing of the comptroller's report, which covers the beginning of 2020's COVID shutdown, "unfortunate."

"Every VR agency in the country has similar statistics during that time period," he said.

People with disabilities, as well, may have hesitated to pursue in-person employment, said Carlos Martinez, executive director of BRIDGES. "In some ways that's understandable," he said. "A big factor is the fear."

BRIDGES is a nonprofit that serves as Rockland County's independent living center and contracts with ACCES-VR to supply training and support.

State Comptroller Tom DiNapoli acknowledged the difficulties in general, and specifically during COVID, for people with disabilities seeking employment.

"People with disabilities often face great obstacles in finding and keeping the jobs they want, and the pandemic has only made

things harder,” DiNapoli said. But he said the State Education Department had to “monitor progress and by significant delays in implementing the individual plans for achieving participants’ employment goals.”

DiNapoli lauded Gov. Kathy Hochul’s recent approval of a Chief Disability Officer. He said he hoped the office “will result in much-needed improvements to the state’s services and support for people living with disabilities.”

Karhan agreed that the new cabinetlevel disabilities office could potentially streamline a complex system.

How VR helps this future vet tech

ACCES-VR training supports people with multiple disabilities, and takes on ambitious career goals. The preparation can include pursuing technical training or college degrees. But, Martinez said, the agencies like BRIDGES that partner with the program offer not just skillbuilding but also resume writing tips and interview coaching and generally confidence boosting.

Thomas McHale, 23, is pursuing veterinary technology training through ACCES-VR.

“Hopefully I will work in a veterinarian’s office as a vet tech,” he said, describing career goals that match his interests. “We have two dogs, a cat, a hedgehog and a bearded dragon.”

McHale grew up in Pleasantville and recently moved into an apartment there. He hopes to bring Fifi, the family’s 17-year-old cat, to live with him soon.

McHale started planning his path to working as a vet tech with an ACCES-VR counselor in January 2020, when he was a student at the Clear View School in Briarcliff Manor. He has applied through the state Office for People with Developmental Disabilities.

Then everything shut down in March due to COVID.

“The plan was completely different,” his mom, Francesca Hagadus-McHale said. The idea of taking prerequisite courses online offered by Westchester Community College, she added, wasn’t going to work.

When ACCES-VR got back on track after about six months, McHale was placed in supervised employment at Muscoot Farm, a dream for him. He worked there three half-days a week for about a year, with less and less supervision necessary. McHale still volunteers at Muscoot Farm in Katonah and the SPCA of Westchester in Briarcliff Manor.

Then McHale enrolled in person for a semester at Delhi University, with ACCES VR paying. It was difficult and lonely. But he passed his three courses.

Now he is taking a veterinary assistance course at WCC, which is being paid for by his family. ACCES VR is paying for a non-credit animal care course at Putnam Northern Westchester BOCES. On Thursday, he walked Sadie, instructor Christina Urbanski’s 7-year-old pit bull, Sadie, who finds herself used by students for practicing bathing, taking vital signs and general care. Sadie is, though, rewarded with plenty of snacks and lots of attention.

The BOCES class ends in June, Hagadus-McHale said, “so now we’re looking at the next phase of things.”

McHale said in the fall, he will have to take on a challenge for him, college-level math, which is integral to his career aspirations. “Math I struggle the most with,” he acknowledged.

Meanwhile, the McHales’ contact at ACCES VR left, and Thomas has yet to meet with the new coordinator there.

Hagadus-McHale said that COVID did slow down the plan, but believes Thomas McHale will reach his goal and build a vet tech career. “So long as he’s supported, he can get there,” she said. “And he will get there.”

As for the comptroller's audit asserting ACCES-VR has taken too long to meet key markers in individuals' progress, Hagadus-McHale said it was hard to judge. But, she said, "it should take as long as it should take. That's all."

What the audit found

While the comptroller's report noted that New York had seen an improvement in employment rates for people with disabilities by 2019, but any gains were wiped out by the pandemic.

Between October 2020 and the end of September 2021, just 5,609 of 44,624 ACCES-VR participants had obtained a job placement, according to the comptroller's report, a 30% drop from the previous fiscal year.

The state Education Department, in its response, said employment statistics alone aren't a measure of success.

Martinez of BRIDGES agreed. "They weren't really measuring the quality, they were addressing quantity," Martinez said of the comptroller's criteria. "We're trying to ignite a self-empowerment."

ACCES-VR is a highly specific program. Participants and counselors develop an Individualized Plan for Employment, or IPE. Often other agencies that serve people with disabilities will work on those IPEs and provide the specific training.

The comptroller's audit said ACCESVR often took beyond the 30-day threshold to determine whether a person would be accepted into the program. The process of developing an IPE is supposed to take 90 days, but auditors said that, too, often took longer. Federally mandated annual reviews – the minimum requirement – also were sometimes late, the audit states.

The Education Department had been ordered in a 2018 federal audit to step up the timeline. Education officials said the program addressed those concerns, and the feds consider the issue resolved.

The comptroller's office also said ACCESS-VR counselors too often used "vague or boilerplate" language in IPEs. Such plans are supposed to be detailed and specific.

The state Education Department contended the comptroller's office looked at some files, but didn't visit onsite and inspect the complete files. Karhan, the labor expert at Cornell, agreed.

"Most of the quality is happening in the field," he said. "I agree with VR saying you're missing the picture. Go out to the agencies and look at case files."

The comptroller's office responded that the program had still fallen short. "There is always room for improvement."

The stakes, auditors said, are high.

"Inadequate monitoring, incomplete IPEs, and delays in an already complex process can deter participants from gaining employment," the comptroller's report said, "which can further result in disruption to the participants' goals of independent living and rising out of poverty."

Nancy Cutler writes about People & Policy. Follow her on Twitter at @nancyrockland.

TRAINING
from page [A1](#) to [A8](#)



Thomas McHale, 23, from Pleasantville, supports Sadie on the exam table with veterinary science teacher Christina Urbanski, in his animal care class at Putnam/Northern Westchester BOCES in Yorktown on April 7. JOHN MEORE/THE JOURNAL NEWS

[Copyright © 2022 Democrat and Chronicle 4/14/2022](#)
[Powered by TECNAVIA](#)
