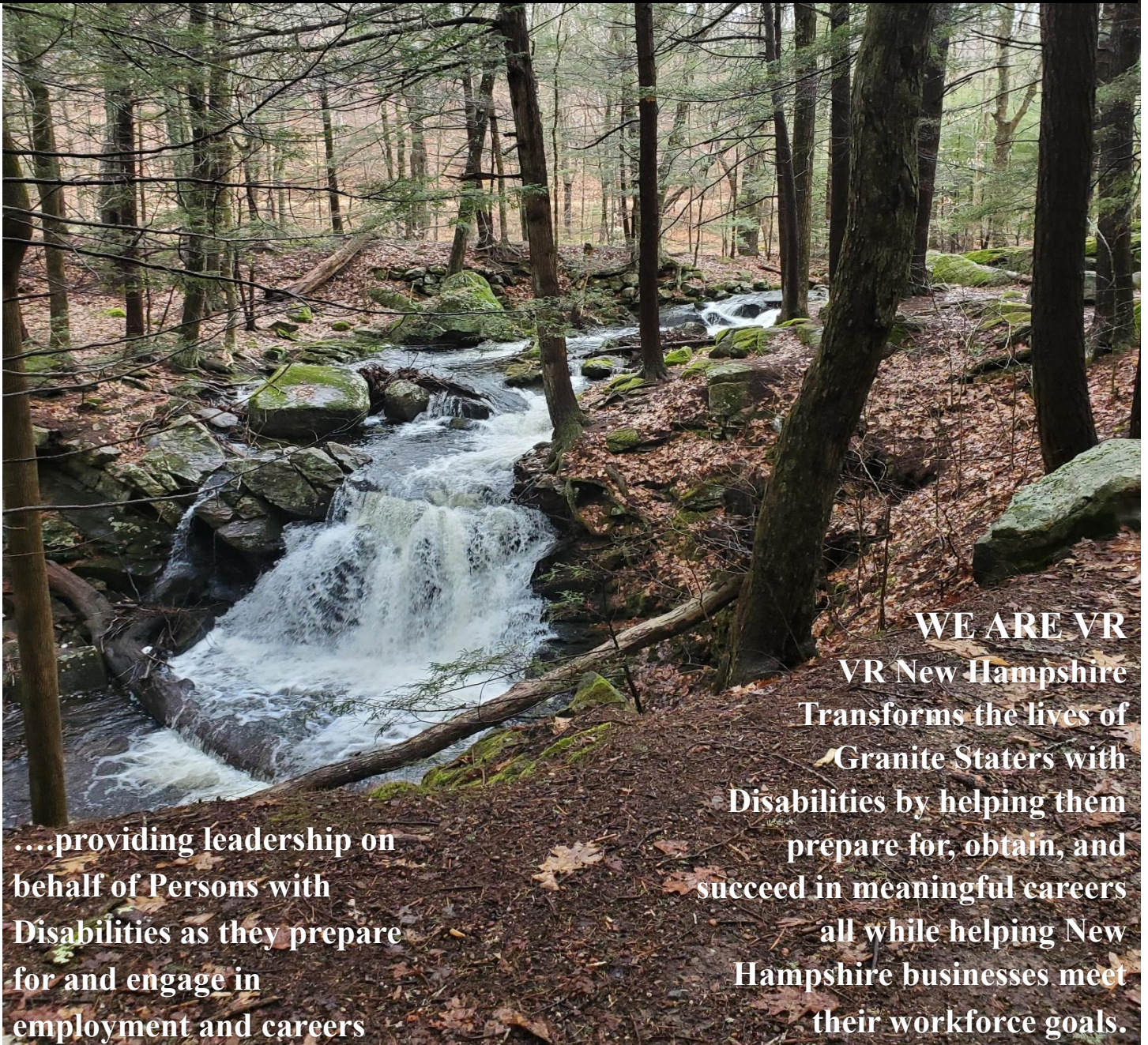


NEW HAMPSHIRE STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL

ANNUAL REPORT 2024



....providing leadership on behalf of Persons with Disabilities as they prepare for and engage in employment and careers

WE ARE VR
VR New Hampshire Transforms the lives of Granite Staters with Disabilities by helping them prepare for, obtain, and succeed in meaningful careers all while helping New Hampshire businesses meet their workforce goals.

VR New Hampshire
EMPOWERING INDIVIDUALS.
ENGAGING BUSINESS.



NH Vocational Rehabilitation
21 South Fruit Street, Suite 20
Concord, NH 03301

VR Director
Richard K. Sala

Our Mission

To assist eligible New Hampshire citizens with disabilities to secure suitable employment and financial and personal independence by providing rehabilitation services.

Our Vision

NH Vocational Rehabilitation seeks to become an organization committed to fulfilling the needs of customers by providing continuously improving quality services through an effort of teamwork and professionalism.



Message from the SRC Chair – Lorrie Ripley

The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) welcomed Richard Sala to the NH VR Director position this year. Rich brings his experience as a Marine, a lawyer for JAG, Professor, and parent to the role. Rich hit the ground running in January and embraced the position with a new perspective and a goal of increasing efficiencies for VR participants, resources for business partners, and desirable work environments for staff. The SRC appreciates the Director reports at its public meetings as well as the open and consistent communication. The SRC enjoys its collaborative relationship with the NH VR Director.

In the beginning of the year, NH VR had many staffing challenges as did many agencies. NH VR instituted a virtual VR office complete with Counselors and a Regional Leader. The virtual VR team members meet remotely with participants and perform all the same tasks as staff in NH. The virtual approach allowed NH VR to tap into skilled VR staff and increased capacity to better serve participants. The agency made a concerted effort over the past year to revise policies and examine procedures to make navigating easier. The result of these efforts has been an increase in the timeliness of eligibility determinations and IPE development.

The main program for adaptive driving services came to an end in NH leaving the State without options for assisting individuals in being evaluated for driving skills or receiving specialized driving instruction. NH VR found a way to purchase an adaptive van used for such assessments and lessons. Some further details remain to be decided but the capacity to assist potential drivers in a timely manner is critical for many job seekers particularly in NH where public transportation can be limited. The SRC is looking forward to the next chapter of the van story.

The SRC remains focused on providing feedback to NH VR to assist in best practice service delivery. The continued work on the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment, policy development and implementation, and membership will keep the agenda busy as we move into the new year.

Thank you to all SRC members who have volunteered their time to participate on this Council and to contribute to the work of NH VR. Thank you for the opportunity to serve as your Chair.

Lorrie Ripley, MS, LCMHC
Title 1 Employment Specialist



Director's Report

Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation To the State Rehabilitation Council

Date: December 2024

Introduction

It is my honor to provide this report to the State Rehabilitation Council as the Director of the New Hampshire Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation (VRNH). Since stepping into this role on January 12, 2024, I have been committed to driving improvements in service delivery, participant outcomes, and overall operational efficiency. This report highlights our progress over the past year, ongoing initiatives, and strategic goals for the future.

Timeliness Improvements

A key focus for the Bureau over the past year has been improving compliance with federal timeliness requirements for eligibility determinations and creating Individualized Plans for Employment (IPEs). The following progress has been achieved:

- **Eligibility Determinations:**
 - Program Year 2023, Quarter 2 (October - December 2023): Compliance at 69.1%.
 - Program Year 2024, Quarter 1 (July - September 2024): Compliance improved to 94.1%.
- **Creation of Individualized Plans for Employment (IPEs):**
 - Program Year 2023, Quarter 2 (October - December 2023): Compliance at 61.7%.
 - Program Year 2024, Quarter 1 (July - September 2024): Compliance improved to 70.7%.

While eligibility determination timeliness has stabilized, we anticipate continued improvement in IPE timeliness as part of our commitment to reach 100% compliance in both areas by 2025.

National Performance Rankings

As of June 2024, New Hampshire's Vocational Rehabilitation program ranks in the first quartile nationwide for employment rates, credential attainment, and measurable skills gains. Specific metrics include:

- **Employment 2nd Quarter After Exit:**
 - 61.8% of participants employed (Rank: 9th nationally).
- **Employment 4th Quarter After Exit:**
 - 61.2% of participants employed (Rank: 5th nationally).
- **Credential Attainment:**
 - 54.8% of participants attained a recognized postsecondary credential or high school diploma (Rank: 5th nationally).
- **Measurable Skills Gain:**
 - 63.9% of participants demonstrated measurable progress in education or training (Rank: 12th nationally).

These rankings reflect the hard work of our staff and partners in delivering high-quality services and achieving strong outcomes for participants.

High-Tech Adaptive Driving Van Initiative

In September 2024, VRNH successfully purchased a state-of-the-art adaptive driving van to address long wait times for participants with mobility challenges. This acquisition provides the state with an organic asset for training participants needing mobility solutions.

We are currently in the process of contracting with a partner to utilize the van, with plans to have this resource fully operational by early 2025. This initiative represents a significant step toward increasing accessibility and supporting participants in achieving greater independence.

Strategic Initiatives for 2025

Looking ahead, the Bureau is focusing on several key initiatives to enhance our services and expand opportunities for participants:

1. **Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS):**
 - We plan to increase efforts to provide Pre-ETS to students with disabilities, ensuring they are better prepared for postsecondary education and the workforce.
 2. **Leveraging Artificial Intelligence (AI):**
 - In 2025, we will explore ways to incorporate AI technology to streamline processes, reduce participant wait times, and improve vocational outcomes.
 3. **Expanding Visibility and Partnerships:**
 - We are committed to strengthening relationships with strategic partners across New Hampshire to improve service delivery and outreach.
-

Conclusion:

The Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation is proud of the progress achieved over the past year and remains committed to continuous improvement in 2025 and beyond. With a focus on timeliness, innovation, and strategic partnerships, we aim to enhance our ability to serve participants and help them achieve their vocational goals.

We value the support and collaboration of the State Rehabilitation Council and look forward to working together in the coming year.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Sala', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Richard K. Sala | Director
Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation



NH State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)

Purpose

Providing Leadership on Behalf of Persons with Disabilities and Guidance to Vocational Rehabilitation Programs.

Mission

New Hampshire State Rehabilitation Council, through action and advocacy, partners with New Hampshire Vocational Rehabilitation to strengthen the agency's operation and effectiveness in the delivery of quality and timely services to individuals with disabilities, as they prepare for and engage in employment and careers.

Vision

By collaborating with key disability-related organizations and building strong partnerships with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and employers' groups, the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) provides leadership and advocacy that increases the number of qualified individuals with disabilities who strive to realize their goals of becoming successfully employed. The SRC maintains and widely publicizes the success of this ongoing relationship.

This is evidenced by Congressional and State legislative recognition of the cost-effective benefits of the VR program, as they provide consistent financial support for VRNH services.

NH State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)

The SRC's responsibilities include:

- Reviewing, analyzing and advising in strategic partnership with VRNH services regarding the performance of the VR agency relating to eligibility, including Order of Selection, extent, scope, and effectiveness of VR services and functions that affect an individual's ability to obtain employment.
- Working in partnership with the state VR program, the SRC develops and reviews state goals established by the VR program, evaluates the effectiveness of the programs and services of the VR agency, and provides a yearly report of progress.
- Providing information and assisting with the development of the unified or combined state plan, plan amendments and needs assessments.
- Conducts and presents an annual customer satisfaction survey to assist the agency in making program improvements and to celebrate successes.
- Prepares and submits an annual report on the status of the VR program.
- Coordinates activities with the other Councils in the state (Independent Living, DD Council and Special Education Council) to avoid duplication of efforts and to develop prosperous relationships to assist in our mission.
- Coordinates the establishment and ongoing relationship with the Independent Living Council and Center for Independent Living program.
- Performs other comparable functions to assist the VR agency, consistent with the purpose of the SRC.
- Each member is responsible for increasing the public's knowledge of VRNH through community outreach and engagement activities with the community and that help develop VRNH success stories.

NH State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)

Executive Committee

Responsible for providing general leadership and guidance for the work of the SRC and its committees. The committee assists with developing meeting agendas and annual reports for the SRC in collaboration with the VR Director and staff. The Executive Committee consists of the Chairperson of the Council, all officers and one other member elected by the Council on an annual basis. It may also include the immediate past Chair. Whenever possible, the majority of this committee will be persons with disabilities.

Governance/ Membership Development

Responsible for the review and updating of the NH SRC By-Laws and making recommendations to the full SRC on these. Participate in reviewing and updating of the current NH SRC Purpose, Mission and Vision statements and makes recommendations to the full SRC on these. The committee helps inform the process for identifying and engaging new Council members to fill positions vacated by Council members vacating and/or terming out of their slot. Assure the membership list is up-to-date for this purpose. The committee also conducts regular orientation for new and potential members of the SRC and ensures that members are acknowledged and thanked for their service.

Policy

Participate in and review the development of VR policies. Monitor Order of Selection and review policy manual regulations.

State Plan

Participate in, review and monitor the development of the State Plan and monitor the multi-agency State Plan. This committee also has responsibility for providing input and recommendation on the activities for the triennial comprehensive statewide needs assessment.

NH State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)

Ben Adams
Manchester
Easter Seals

Dawn Breault
Merrimack
Special Education

Carrie Dudley
Concord
SILC Chair

Richard Salas
VR Director

Jessica Laurie, Ex-
officio SBVI
VR Counselor

James Ziegra,
Concord
Disability Rights Center

Brandy Quinn-
Richards, Rep Special
Education

Isadora Rodriguez-
Legendre, NH Council
on Developmental
Disabilities Alternate

Nathalie Fortier
Concord
Future in Sight

Lisa Gerrard Vice
Chair, Rep Office
of Workforce
Opportunity

Heidi Duprey, Rep.
Rochester
Parent Information Center

John Richards, Peterborough,
NH Brain Injury Foundation

Lorrie Ripley, Chair
Concord
Client Assistance Program (CAP)

Andrea Kaneb,
Exeter
Deaf & Hard of Hearing

Pamela Stiles,
NH Council on Developmental
Disabilities

Carrie Duran, Wolfeboro
Disability Advocate

Courtney LaBranche, CARES,
LLC, Rochester

NH State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)

Recap of the SRC's Year – Highlights

January 2024: Richard Sala introduced himself as the new VR Director. He started on January 17, 2024. Originally from New York, his background includes 21 years of service in the US Marine Corps. While in the service he attended law school. He retired from the Marines in 2018 and relocated to New Hampshire where he joined the NH Department of Education as legal council to the Commissioner. He has taught constitutional law, national security law and legislation and regulation at Vermont Law and Graduate School.

Excited to be here, Richard plans on visiting all regional offices to meet with staff and listen to their concerns of what works well and what can be improved.

Chantel Hagen gave the Council an overview of VRNH's QA project and the work the QA Unit has done since its creation in 2023. In 2024 the focus will be on compliance around timeliness of eligibility determinations, IPE development and successful rehabilitations.

The work of the Policy Committee in the previous year resulted in updates to VR's policies on Strategic Direction, Transition Services, Pre-Employment Transition and Policy on Writing, Issuing, and Maintaining Agency Policies. These became effective on 1-2-24.

The final draft of the VR portion of the Workforce Opportunity Council State Plan is scheduled to be submitted in early February.

April 2024: As part of his update, the Director updated the Council on the work being done in concert with the Director of Deaf Services to improve services to the deaf and hard of hearing community. This comes after feedback from NDHHS, meeting with representatives from the deaf community and listening to their concerns. As a start, videos on the VR website will be updated to be made accessible to the deaf community. Work also continues on filling the vacant RCD position in the Manchester office.

The Council was updated on the agency's adaptive driving program and the challenges the program faces to continue this service. Thinking "outside of the box" there may be some exciting alternatives to pursue to find solutions and pool resources with neighboring states who are in a similar situation.

SRC Membership recruitment continues to be an issue, especially in the categories of business and industry and consumers.

The CSNA, which was last completed in 2022, needs to be updated by December of 2025. The vendor selected to lead this task, Market Decisions, is ready to begin surveying stakeholders. Market Decisions will be invited to a future SRC meeting to keep the Council updated on the CSNA activities.

Activities and Accomplishments

June 2024: Richard Sala announces that VRNH's State Plan has been approved by RSA. As of July 1, 2024, VR will no longer be in an order of selection.

The agency has been working hard on eligibility and IPE development. In the first quarter there was a 10.4% increase in time from application to eligibility representing 78.9% against target for eligibilities and almost 60% for IPE development.

Brian Robertson and Katie Klinko from Market Decisions were present remotely to update the Council on their work on the 2024 Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment. The CSNA will assist VRNH to determine the current state of available programs for individuals with disability being served by VR or others. It will also identify the characteristics of individuals in NH who are not being served but would benefit from services if they were aware of their availability. Project members will include the following groups to interview for 2024:

- Individuals with the most significant disabilities
- Individuals with disabilities who are minorities and those with disabilities that have not been served or who are underserved by VR
- Individuals with disabilities served through other components of the statewide workforce investment program
- Youth with disabilities and students with disabilities

Unfortunately, the presentation from Market Decisions was cut short due to statewide internet connectivity issues. The Chair made the decision to end the meeting and continue this discussion at the next meeting in September.

September 2024: In his director's report, Richard Sala announced that VRNH has finalized the purchase of a vehicle for its adaptive driving program. The next step will be to find a place to house the vehicle.

During the month of September, the agency, as a whole, were compliant on 94% of eligibilities and 81% for plan developments.

Joy Sabolevski gave the Council an update on VRNH's transition services and where we are in the strategic priorities/key performance indicators.

As part of "Deaf Awareness Month", Beth Keller gave council members a refresher on issues surrounding deafness.

November 2024: Timeliness for eligibilities and IPE is at 95% and plans are at 80%. This is moving in the right direction and much improved since Richard began in January.

Staff from Market Decisions attended remotely to continue it's Council update on where they are in the CSNA process. Consumers are reporting a high level of satisfaction in the services they received from VR. Transportation issues, once again, is at the top of the list of barriers consumer face when seeking employment. Of those dissatisfied, service gaps due to staffing issues were cited an additional barrier. Unmet needs in the state are housing, social and recreational opportunities and increased access to training and mental health services.

Elections for the leadership of the SRC for 2025 are held. James Ziegler is elected as Chair, Lorrie Ripley as 1st Vice Chair and Isadora Rodriguez-Legendre is elected as 2nd Vice Chair.

NH Vocational Rehabilitation FY 2024 in Review October 1, 2023 – September 30, 2024

Vocational Rehabilitation is a joint State/Federal program that assists eligible individuals with disabilities to become contributing members of their community. To this end, New Hampshire Vocational Rehabilitation supports the following programs and priorities.

- Rehabilitation Services
- Services to the Blind and Visually Impaired
- Independent Living
- Transition & Pre-Employment Transition Services
- Supported Employment

Working with People with Disabilities.....

During Federal Fiscal Year 2024, NH Vocational Rehabilitation

- Helped **294 individuals** with disabilities gain employment. A 26% increase from last year
- The average hourly wage was **\$18.91**
- The average hours worked per week was **27**
- The average weekly salary was **\$555**
- The average annual salary was **\$28,856**

NH Vocational Rehabilitation FY 2024 in Review October 1, 2023 – September 30, 2024

People with disabilities can work and take advantage of the opportunities available to the citizens of New Hampshire. Yet they face barriers unique to their situation, barriers that prevent them from achieving their goals. Vocational Rehabilitation assists persons with disabilities to achieve their employment goals through the provision of services to address those barriers.

Who Are Our Customers

During Federal Fiscal Year 2024, NH Vocational Rehabilitation....

- Worked with 4,062 eligible individuals
- Received 1,736 new applicants a 19% increase over the previous year

Types of Disabilities

Mental Health	38%
Cognitive	28%
Physical Disability	17%
Blind or Visual Impairment	6%
Hard of Hearing	4%
Communicative	4%
Other	1%
Deafness	1%

NH Vocational Rehabilitation FY 2024 in Review October 1, 2023 – September 30, 2024

In Fiscal Year 2024:

- VRNH assisted 47 individuals with a Supported Employment goal in achieving their successful outcome.
- VRNH assisted 947 individuals in writing their Initial Plans for Employment; 310 or 33% of those were 21 or under.
- VRNH assisted 15 individuals in completing their Individual Plan for Employment in Self-Employment.

No one should be deprived of an opportunity to recognize and realize their talents and potentialities because of a disability.

Average Earnings

*.. for Federal Fiscal Year 2024
the Average annual earnings of customers before and after rehabilitation.*

**Before
\$15,086**



**After
\$28,856**



NH Vocational Rehabilitation FY 2024 in Review October 1, 2023 – September 30, 2024

**Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)
Performance Indicators and Measures for Program Year 2023
(7/1/2023 - 6/30/2024)**

Measure	Negotiated Target	VRNH Rate
Employment Rate in the Second Quarter after Exit	52.3%	61.8%
Employment Rate in the Fourth Quarter after Exit	54.7%	61.2%
Median Earnings in the Second Quarter after Exit	\$4,200	\$5,448
Credential Rate	39.5%	54.8%

Sources of Revenue

During Federal Fiscal Year 2024, VRNH received....

Federal Funds	\$15,447,674
State Funds	\$3,404,795
Program Income	\$1,534,397
Total	\$20,386,866

NH State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)

Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey

The most recent Customer Satisfaction Survey was completed in 2022 by The *Institute of Community Inclusion, U Mass Boston* surveying recipients of:

- VR Services
- Services for Blind & Visual Impaired
- Individuals receiving services from the Older Blind Independent Living program
-

6,000 + customers were surveyed in 2 waves:

- 4,538 customers served in 2019 – 2020
- 1,470 customers served in 2020 – 2021

The results indicated that **85%** of respondents were satisfied with the services received from VRNH/SBVI while **87%** were satisfied with services received from the Older Blind Independent Living Program.

Services for the Blind and Vision Impaired Continues to Lead the Way for Innovative Programing Leading to the Success of our Participants

By Scott Vittner

Administrator Services for the Blind and Vision Impaired

2024 was another innovative, exciting and successful year for all the Services for the Blind and Vision Impaired (SBVI) programs and the participants we serve. SBVI Vocational Rehabilitation (SBVI VR) for most of 2024 operated with only 2 counselors instead of 3. Despite that, due to the dedication of the SBVI VR Counselors, we had a successful rehabilitation/employment rate of 68% for the 1st two quarters of FY24. With a national employment rate for blind and vision impaired of **42%, it further demonstrates the incredible work done by the SBVI staff. We still have work to do, increasing the employment rate of persons who are blind and vision impaired is our ongoing goal. SBVI VR continues to lead NH Vocational Rehabilitation (NHVR) in the key areas monitored by the Rehabilitation Services Administration.

Our SBVI Older Individuals who are Blind or Vision Impaired (OIBVI) continues to expand serving over 350 people in FY24, up from just over 300 for FY23, providing independent living services and a variety of low vision aids. OIBVI facilitates 6 bi-monthly pier support groups in various areas of the state bringing in speakers, low vision specialist, medical professionals and facilitating discussions. The 6 groups are an increase from FY 23 when OIBVI facilitated 5 groups.

OIBVI program coordinator Amy Clark and I attended the NH Ophthalmologic Association annual convention in November manning an SBVI information table. We were able to connect with numerous eye doctors, ophthalmologic technicians and office staff at this event providing information about SBVI services and the referral process.

As was mentioned in last year's report, Services for the Blind and Vision Impaired in 2021 launched new programs for both the youth ages 14 to 21 (Pre-ETS and Transition-aged learners) Interdisciplinary Collaborative Engagement (ICE) and for the Older Blind population 55 and up Silver Retreats. Both of those highly successful programs will be continuing with contract renewals having been approved by the Governor and Counsel; Silver Retreats for 3 years and the ICE youth transition program for 2 years.

With our contract partners for the Silver Retreat's Future In Sight (FIS), we will continue to hold five-day retreats designed to introduce members of the SBVI Older Blind community to additional low-vision and non-visual skills of blindness in a real-life, extended learning environment. These sessions are meant to provide the program participants with significantly more training in blindness skills, and conversation about adjusting to vision loss, than they would ordinarily receive from a few hours visit to their homes.

Services for Blind & Visual Impaired

On the other end of the age spectrum, 14 to 21, our contract partner Sky's the Limit Communications, owned and operated by David DeNotaris, will continue to hold 5 in-person and 5 remote events per year. The number of students attending the events has increased to an average of 17. Once again, we will be bringing 12 students to Washington DC in January for a 3-day legislative seminar. Each year, the seminar focuses on approximately three vital legislative initiatives. These initiatives cover vital areas such as civil rights, educational services, and programs, employment rehabilitation for the blind, specialized library services for the visually impaired, and structuring and funding of federal programs. Additionally, they address other relevant and pressing issues. Last year the students met with the Legislative Directors for New Hampshire's 2 Senators and 2 House Representatives to tell their personal stories and how the proposed legislative initiatives would positively impact their lives. After the seminar last year an email was received from Senator Maggie Hassan's office saying Senator Hassan had decided to sponsor the proposed legislation regarding the accessibility of medical equipment and devices and the visit from the students played a large role in her decision.

Our goal at SBVI for 2025 is to continue advocating for the population we serve and provide the best services available to assist them in achieving their full potential.

******From the National Research & Training Center on Blindness & Low Vision.

We found that about 42% of the U.S. population with a visual impairment were employed, this compares to a 77% employment rate for people without disabilities and a 35% employment rate for people with other types of disabilities.

Partnerships

NH State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)

The SRC continues to develop linkages and forge productive relationships with a number of Councils and Boards, including:

- State Workforce Investment Board (SWIB)
- Deaf and Hard of Hearing Advisory Committee
- Services for Blind and Visual Impaired Advisory Committee
- Governor's Commission on Disability (GCD)
- Granite State Independent Living
- Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC)
- Client Assistance Program
- Parent Information Center
- NH Council on Developmental Disabilities
- NH Department of Health and Human Services: Bureau of Developmental Services and the Bureau of Mental Health Services
- University System of New Hampshire

EMPLOYMENT LEADERSHIP AWARDS

The Employment Leadership Awards are presented each year to five New Hampshire businesses who demonstrate their commitment to recognize the skills and contributions that people with disabilities bring to the workforce. These businesses are promoting and adopting inclusive policies and hiring practices that allow people with physical, mental, and/or developmental disabilities, to fairly compete and excel in paid, gainful employment.

These awards recognize companies and businesses around NH that are leading efforts to create and nurture a diverse and inclusive workforce. We hold this exciting recognition event in October to coincide with National Disability Employment Awareness month.

Nominees are submitted by businesses, NH Vocational Rehabilitation staff and Community Rehabilitation Providers, as well as other New Hampshire disability and mental health organizations and the general public.

Nominations are evaluated based on the company's efforts to:

- create opportunities that assist people with all types of disabilities to develop and expand their skills in competitive employment
- adopt inclusive hiring and training practices that allow people with all types of disabilities to fairly compete for employment
- engage community partners to become a more diverse workplace within communities

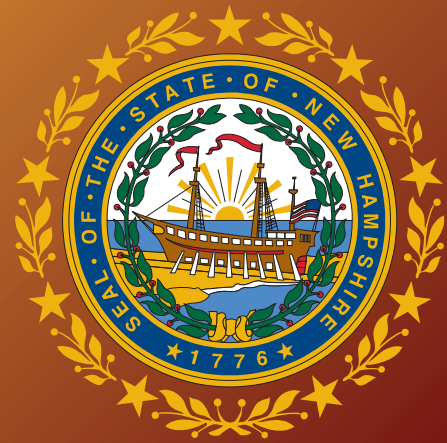
We recognize and value the commitment and dedication of all the NH businesses supporting inclusive work environments for people with disabilities. We are thrilled to have had many great nominations again this year. This was our 15th year providing this honor. In 2024, we had yet another pool of exemplary recruitment, training, and retention of people with disabilities in the five businesses we recognized: The DoubleTree by Hilton in Manchester, Home Depot in Littleton, Kendal at Hanover, Hanover, NH, Shaw's in Littleton and Subway in Gorham. Additionally, we would like to thank the members of the Employment Leadership Awards Committee for their steadfast devotion in identifying New Hampshire businesses that are creating opportunities for people with disabilities to have integrated and competitive employment options. Without their contribution of many hours of identifying and vetting these businesses, these awards could not happen.



Join Us



15th Annual Statewide Employer Recognition Ceremony



Thursday, October 10, 2024
9:00 am - Noon
Puritan Conference Center,
Manchester, NH



Visit <https://bit.ly/4cVViwu>
or scan QR code
to register



Presenting Sponsors



Welcome to the 15th Annual Employment Leadership Awards

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing to congratulate each awardee from the New Hampshire Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation's Employment Leadership Award. This accolade is a testament to your exceptional efforts in creating a workplace environment that values and supports individuals with disabilities.

Your dedication to actively recruiting, hiring, retaining, and promoting people with disabilities exemplifies true leadership and sets a commendable standard for other businesses in New Hampshire. By embracing a culture that fosters opportunity and supports diverse talents, you not only enrich the lives of your employees but also contribute significantly to the strength and resilience of our community.

I encourage you to continue the practices and initiatives that have earned you this important award. Your commitment to creating a supportive environment enhances workplace morale and productivity and serves as a beacon of inspiration for others.

I encourage you to share your positive experiences and success stories with

fellow businesses, inspiring them to follow your lead and create more opportunities for individuals who have experienced disabilities.

Your efforts have an impact far beyond your business. You are contributing to a society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and contribute meaningfully. This is a cause worth championing, and your leadership makes a significant difference.

Once again, congratulations on this well-deserved recognition. Your dedication to creating opportunities is commendable, and I am confident that your ongoing efforts will continue to pave the way for positive change in our community.

Thank you for your commitment and for being a shining example of what it means to be an employer that values every individual.



Richard Sala
Director of the NH
Bureau of Vocational
Rehabilitation (NH-VR)

I would like to congratulate the 2024 winners of the Employment Leadership Awards (ELA) on behalf of the New Hampshire Council on Developmental Disabilities (NHCDD). The NHCDD is dedicated to the pursuit of dignity and justice, authentic community inclusion, cultural competency, and self-determination for all New Hampshire residents with developmental disabilities. People with disabilities want to lead full lives in the community. In order to do that there need to be more community-based integrated work opportunities.

These awards recognize companies and businesses around NH that are creating and fostering a diverse and inclusive workforce. Each of these winners understands the value of employing individuals with disabilities and demonstrate this through their hiring practices.

More about each of the winners in this insert. We also hope you can attend the 2024 recognition event in October, which is National Disability Employment Awareness month. It is the perfect opportunity to highlight the work of this year's Employment Leadership Awards recipients and share their success stories with other individuals and companies around New Hampshire. We hope they can be a resource to new business leaders looking to develop a more diverse workforce.

Isadora Rodriguez-Legendre,
Executive Director,
NH Council on
Developmental
Disabilities



Special thanks to the Employment
Leadership Awards Committee
for 15 years of hard work!

Tracey Frye, Co-Chair –
NH Department of Education
Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation

Terri Tedeschi, Co-Chair –
NH Department of Education
Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation

Abigail Conger – NH Department
of Health and Human Services
Bureau of Developmental Services

Ryan Colby – OMCF Consulting

Jennifer Cook – J Cook Workforce
Solutions, LLC

Barb Hendrick – Pathways
of the River Valley

Rebecca James – Cares, LLC

Courtney LaBranche – Cares, LLC

Charles Lewis – NH Department
of Education Bureau of Vocational
Rehabilitation

Rocky Morelli – Opportunity
Networks

Mary Northrup – Work Opportunities
Unlimited

Isadora Rodriguez-Legendre –
The New Hampshire Council
on Developmental Disabilities

Priyanka Sharma –
NH Department of Education Bureau
of Vocational Rehabilitation

Community Sponsors



2023 Employment Leadership Award Recipients

AVI Foodsystems • CVS Health • Jake's Old Fashioned
Ice Cream & Bakery • Taylor Community •
WIN WASTE Innovations

2022 Employment Leadership Award Recipients

Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center • Ma's Café • McLane
Concord • Port City Pretzels • Potters House Bakery and Café

The DoubleTree by Hilton Manchester Downtown

2024 Employment Leadership Awards



Known for its dedication to hospitality and exceptional guest experiences, The DoubleTree by Hilton Manchester Downtown distinguishes itself with a deeply ingrained commitment to diversity and inclusivity.

Under the leadership of Ray Bewsher, Director of Human Resources, the hotel has implemented inclusive hiring practices that prioritize individuals with physical, mental health issues, and developmental disabilities. This proactive approach not only enriches the workforce but also enhances the overall guest experience through genuine and heartfelt hospitality.

The nomination for the Employment Leadership Award came in recognition of DoubleTree Manchester collaboration with The Mental Health Center of Greater Manchester. Since 2021, this partnership has been instrumental in supporting individuals facing various challenges, including mental health issues, to thrive in competitive employment roles within the hotel.

One success story involves a collaboration between DoubleTree Manchester and The Mental Health Center of Greater Manchester, where strategic accommodations and job carving techniques were implemented to ensure the success of a patient in the workforce. With ongoing support and encouragement from the team at Double Tree Manchester, the individual has flour-

ished, demonstrating the transformative impact of inclusive employment practices.

“Ray Bewsher and his team at DoubleTree Manchester have been exceptional partners,” expressed a representative from The Mental Health Center of Greater Manchester. “Their dedication to understanding and accommodating the needs of individuals with disabilities is commendable. It’s truly inspiring to see how they empower their employees to reach their full potential.”

The inclusive culture fostered at DoubleTree Manchester is rooted in their mission to be the preminent global hospitality company, making them the first choice of guests, team members, and owners alike. By prioritizing diversity and inclusivity, DoubleTree Manchester not only enriches the lives of its employees but also sets a standard of excellence in the hospitality industry.

“In our interactions with DoubleTree Manchester, it’s evident that they value open communication and prioritize the well-being of their employees,” noted a collaborator from The Mental Health Center of Greater Manchester. “Their approach serves as a model for other businesses looking to create a supportive and inclusive workplace.”

As DoubleTree Manchester continues to uphold its vision of hospitality, it continues to illuminate pathways for others to follow, setting a shining example of what it means to be a leader in disability employment and inclusive practices.

2021 Employment Leadership Award Recipients

JMD Industries • Keene Family YMCA • Morgan Records Management • Smiths Medical • Stackry

2019 Employment Leadership Award Recipients

CVSHealth • Fisher Auto Parts • Five Guys • Margaritas Mexican Restaurant • RJ’s Motorsports



As the largest home improvement retailer in the United States, Home Depot is renowned for its extensive range of products and its commitment to delivering exceptional service at competitive prices. Headquartered in Cobb County, Georgia, the company operates over 2,300 stores worldwide, generating substantial revenue and employing a diverse workforce of over 490,000 individuals.

Under the leadership of Scott Blanchard, the Human Resources Director, and Peter Lauzon, the Store Manager, Home Depot in Littleton has championed inclusive hiring practices. These practices prioritize diversity and provide career advancement opportunities within the company for employees who wish to build long-term careers.

Home Depot in Littleton has forged strong partnerships with local organizations like Common Ground, the Mental Health Center, and LTS, supporting individuals with disabilities in securing roles ranging from cashiers and front-end associates to lawn and garden associates and loader/stocking associates.

Peter Lauzon, known for his employee-centric approach, believes in hiring individuals based on their character and abilities. Diversity is at the heart of our hiring philosophy. He believes there is a job in his store for everyone who wants to work.

Home Depot not only provides job opportunities but also offers career pathway counseling to employees. This initiative supports personal growth and career development, allowing individuals to chart their course within the company and achieve their professional aspirations. Home Depot remains committed to fostering a diverse and welcoming workplace. They prioritize hiring good-hearted, friendly individuals who contribute positively to the customer experience, regardless of background.

“The positivity at Home Depot is palpable,” noted a representative from Northern Human Services. “Employees are visibly happy, and the management team is supportive and welcoming. They truly embody their commitment to creating a positive work environment.”

“We appreciate Home Depot’s collaborative spirit and commitment to clear communication,” added the representative. “Their inclusive practices and support for our agency and employees demonstrate their alignment with our mission of fostering meaningful, equitable lives for all.”

Home Depot in Littleton, NH, stands as a model of employment leadership and inclusivity in the retail sector. Through their inclusive hiring practices, supportive workplace culture, dedication to diversity, and commitment to career development, Home Depot not only enriches the lives of its employees but also sets a standard for fostering inclusive communities and workplaces.

2018 Employment Leadership Award Recipients

The Comfort Inn • Dunkin Donuts • The Home Depot
• Omni Mount Washington • Worthen Industries

2017 Employment Leadership Award Recipients

7th Settlement Brewery • Granite State Hospitality/The Common
Man Roadside • Demoulas Market Basket • Sanel Auto Parts
• Sodexo Dining Services and Keene State College

Kendal at Hanover

2024 Employment Leadership Awards



Kendal at Hanover, an esteemed Life Plan community in Hanover, NH, has been honored with the 2024 Employment Leadership Award. This prestigious accolade recognizes New Hampshire businesses that excel in disability employment. Under the leadership of Steven George, Director of Dining Services, Kendal at Hanover exemplifies a nurturing, inclusive work environment where all employees can thrive.

The Kendal Corporation, established in the early 1970s and based in Pennsylvania, has a rich history of developing and operating communities for older adults. Rooted in Quaker principles, the foundation of all Kendal communities is mutual respect and caring for all individuals.

At Kendal at Hanover, supervisors are known for their consistent, measured, and empathetic approach. This leadership style fosters an environment where employees can build new skill sets, increase their confidence, and receive recognition for their accomplishments without judgment. The community offers paths for growth, allowing for internal transfers between departments, meeting various needs and preferences.

When challenges arise, the leadership team works tirelessly to improve situations, adapt onsite accommodations or expectations,

and support employees in difficult circumstances. This dedication ensures that employees remain integral parts of the community, especially when they need it the most.

Steven George, influenced by a mentor from a previous position, has created a culture of inclusivity in the kitchen. His motto “You never know about ability until you try” underscores their proactive approach to hiring people with disabilities. Kendal at Hanover actively recruits from local high schools and collaborates with community entities to expand their inclusive hiring practices.

Kendal at Hanover ensures that employees with disabilities receive the same opportunities as their coworkers. The focus is on building skills and offering raises and promotions based on merit. The leadership team views each person as an individual, not a statistic, and prioritizes employee development. They emphasize that everyone, regardless of ability, brings value and deserves a chance to contribute.

In conclusion, Kendal at Hanover’s receipt of the 2024 Employment Leadership Award underscores its role as a pioneer in disability employment. Through its innovative practices and unwavering commitment to inclusion, Kendal at Hanover is not only improving the lives of its employees and residents but also setting a benchmark for excellence in the broader business community.

2016 Employment Leadership Award Recipients

HMSHost • Homewood Suites by Hilton, Gateway Hills
• LTC Partners • Saint Anselm College
Dining Services • Warwick Mills

2015 Employment Leadership Award Recipients

Bass Pro Shops • Havenwood Heritage Heights
• Market Basket • Single Digits • Tilt’n Diner

Shaw's Supermarket

2024 Employment Leadership Awards



Located in the picturesque town of Littleton, Shaw's Supermarket has long been a staple in the community, not only for its quality products and customer service, but also for its unwavering support of diversity in the workplace.

The journey towards this recognition began with Shaw's proactive engagement with Northern Human Services. In 2021, Shaw's took a significant step by hiring one of their participants, a remarkable individual who had prior experience as a bagger and front-end associate at another supermarket.

This employee's journey at Shaw's started with intensive support, gradually transitioning to more independent work under the natural support provided by the supermarket. Shaw's management team, notably Sowannary Doucette, Sarah Davis, and Karen Schumann, demonstrated exceptional foresight and compassion by recognizing this individual's strengths and repositioning her as a cashier. This move not only suited her skills better but also minimized distractions, allowing her to excel in her new role.

The support provided by Shaw's management team extends beyond task allocation. They have implemented protocols to safeguard

their employees' well-being, particularly cashiers. Their system allows any cashier to call for immediate managerial support when confronted with difficult situations, ensuring swift resolution and the well-being of the employee.

This Northern Human Services participant's success story at Shaw's is a testament to the inclusive workplace culture fostered by the supermarket. Her supervisors emphasize open communication, trust, and continuous support, which have enabled her to thrive despite the challenges posed by her disability.

Speaking about Shaw's Supermarket, the staff at Northern Human Services expressed deep gratitude and admiration for the management team's dedication and empathy towards their employees. Over the years, Shaw's has consistently demonstrated a commitment to workforce inclusion, employing individuals with disabilities and providing them with opportunities to thrive in a supportive and respectful environment.

Shaw's Supermarket in Littleton, NH, stands as a beacon of workplace inclusivity and leadership in disability employment. Through their proactive initiatives and compassionate management, Shaw's has set a commendable example for businesses across New Hampshire.

2014 Employment Leadership Award Recipients

North American Equipment Upfitters • Portsmouth Regional Hospital • Sponge Jet • Texas Roadhouse • University of New Hampshire & UNH Dining Services

2013 Employment Leadership Award Recipients

Dyn • Kendal at Hanover • Portsmouth Naval Shipyard
• Chunky's Cinema Pub



In the cozy town of Gorham, New Hampshire, a Subway franchise stands out not only for its delicious sandwiches but also for its exceptional commitment to inclusive hiring practices. Owned and operated by White Mountain Subways, this particular Subway has garnered attention and accolades, receiving the 2024 Employment Leadership Award.

Gwen McKinnon, the manager of this Subway location, is the driving force behind its inclusive workplace culture. Known for her kindness and understanding, Gwen goes above and beyond to ensure that employees with disabilities feel supported and valued. She works closely with Northern Human Services, an area agency partner, to facilitate meaningful employment opportunities for individuals seeking to contribute to their community through gainful employment.

Under Gwen's leadership, Subway in Gorham has successfully integrated individuals with disabilities into various roles within the store, including prep work, dishwashing, and sandwich preparation. What sets Gwen apart is her personalized approach to management. She takes the time to understand each employee's strengths and challenges, tailoring support and accommodations accordingly.

"When someone joins our team, we focus on what they can do rather than what they can't," Gwen emphasizes. She actively

encourages employees to step out of their comfort zones, gradually expanding their responsibilities as they become more confident. This approach not only fosters professional development but also builds self-esteem and a sense of belonging among the team members.

Gwen's dedication extends beyond day-to-day operations. She is proactive in addressing any issues that arise, ensuring a harmonious work environment where everyone feels respected and heard. Her genuine care is reflected in the little things, such as remembering each employee's favorite sandwiches and how they like them prepared—a small gesture that goes a long way in making employees feel valued.

Moreover, Subway in Gorham offers equal benefits to all team members, including discounted lunches, time off, and tips. This equitable treatment underscores Subway's commitment to fairness and inclusivity at every level of employment.

For the employees at Subway in Gorham, it's not just a job—it's an opportunity to thrive and forge meaningful connections within the community. Through Gwen's leadership and the support of White Mountain Subways, this Subway franchise exemplifies how businesses can positively impact individuals' lives by embracing diversity and fostering an inclusive workplace culture.

2012 Employment Leadership Award Recipients

Chartwells • Rita Mae's Restaurant • Remcon North Corp.
• Pete & Gerry's Organic Eggs • Murdawg Custom
& Everything Automotive

2011 Employment Leadership Award Recipients

Astronics-Luminescent Systems, Inc. • Lowe's • The Barley House
• RKM Research and Communications, Inc. • Concord Hospital

Our Mission:
The NH Council on Developmental Disabilities is dedicated to the pursuit of dignity and justice, authentic community inclusion, cultural competency, and self-determination for all New Hampshire residents with developmental disabilities.



Our Belief: We believe that individuals of all abilities are fully able to participate meaningfully in our society when given the supports and opportunities they need.

Our Work: We work alongside people with disabilities to elevate their voices and to bring groups together to plan and build a better life for all of us.

Council Members:

- | | |
|----------------|-----------------------|
| Alyssa Antman | Tammy Mills |
| Suzanne Austin | Eyob O'Connor |
| Abigail Conger | Stephanie Patrick |
| Jean Crouch | Michele Petersen |
| Carrie Duran | James Piet |
| Kelly Ehrhart | Jennifer Pineo |
| Caitlyn Fulton | Sarah Sadowski |
| Seana Hallberg | Arielle Van De Water |
| Tim Houle | Patricia Vincent-Piet |
| Nicole Mello | Alexis Wayland |

Council Staff:

- | | |
|---|--|
| Isadora Rodriguez-Legendre
<i>Executive Director</i> | Elizabeth Page
<i>Senior Accounting Tech.</i> |
| Vanessa Blais
<i>Director of Policy and Planning</i> | Chase Eagleson
<i>Policy and Planning Coordinator</i> |
| Pamela Stiles
<i>Executive Assistant</i> | Blake Tyler
<i>Social Media Outreach Assistant</i> |

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Find Your Regional VR Office

VR New Hampshire is ready to help you meet your employment or workforce goals. Please call any of our offices to begin the conversation. We look forward to hearing from you!

Berlin Regional Office

- ☎ 603-752-2271 (V/TTY)
- 📠 603-752-5940

Concord Regional Office

- ☎ 603-271-2327 (V/TTY)
- 📠 603-271-7095

Keene Regional Office

- ☎ 603-357-0266 (V/TTY)
- 📠 603-352-1391

Manchester Regional Office

- ☎ 603-669-8733 (V/TTY)
- 📠 603-668-2640

Nashua Regional Office

- ☎ 603-889-6844 (V/TTY)
- 📠 603-889-2292

Portsmouth Regional Office

- ☎ 603-436-8884 (V/TTY)
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Services for the Blind & Vision Impaired

- ☎ 603-271-3537
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- 📠 603-271-3816



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Contact the SRC

Call: 603-271-3348
Sue Roma, SRC liaison

Fax: 603-271-7095

Write:
Chair, State Rehabilitation Council
NH Vocational Rehabilitation
21 South Fruit Street, Suite 20
Concord, NH 03301

Website:

[Advisory Councils | Department of Education](#)

Attend a Meeting or Public Forum:

The State Rehabilitation Council meetings and Public Forums are open to the public. SRC meetings are generally held in October, January, April and June with a special retreat each September/October.

Public forums are generally held in February or March.

The meeting locations, dates and times are posted on the SRC webpage.

Apply for Membership:

If you are interested in becoming a member of the SRC, you can contact Sue Roma, SRC Liaison at 603-271-3348 or email sueroma@doe.nh.gov