2012 Ability Works Award recipients honored

As part of National Disability Employment Awareness Month celebrations, the West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services honored six outstanding individuals who have benefited from DRS services and have reached their employment goals.

Awards were presented at the annual Ability Works Recognition Ceremony on Oct. 24 in the West Virginia Culture Center Theater, with keynote remarks by former West Virginia University Football Coach Don Nehlen.

Award recipients were:

**Kayla Bland, State Winner, Beckley District**

A devastating motor vehicle accident dramatically changed the life of Kayla Bland, a 24-year-old worker at Appalachian Electronics Instruments, Inc., in Fairlea. A bad reaction to a blood transfusion and a kidney transplant were just two of the obstacles facing Kayla. Her determination and hard work, aided by DRS counseling and guidance and college financial assistance, helped her finish her education and secure a job running a contact machine.

**Darrel Beasley, Charleston District**

Darrel Beasley, a 23-year-old worker at Goodwill Industries of Kanawha Valley in Charleston, would not let his bilateral profound hearing loss interfere with gaining his independence. He worked with a DRS rehabilitation counselor to explore work skills and job options. Today he is a janitorial worker for the State Capitol Complex work crew, and he loves his job.

**Sara Carlstrom, Clarksburg District**

Sara Carlstrom is a 23-year-old registered nurse at West Virginia University Hospitals in Morgantown. Hearing loss required her to get hearing aids when she was in elementary school. Her DRS rehabilitation counselor helped her get accommodations to support her in college. Sara has an associate’s degree in nursing, and is pursuing a bachelor’s degree while working.

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David Douglas, Wheeling District

David Douglas, a 21-year-old worker at REM Community Options in Williamstown, was diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome as a child. David used his personal experiences to determine that he wanted to work with people with disabilities. DRS assessments and training helped David identify that he wanted to be a direct services professional so he could help others with disabilities.

Hannah Nuce, Huntington District

Hannah Nuce, a 26-year-old worker at Olive Garden restaurant in Barboursville, has a cognitive disability which causes her to have some difficulty in learning new tasks and with multi-tasking. DRS assisted with work adjustment training through Goodwill Industries, and the experience helped her to develop job skills and self-esteem. Hannah works at Olive Garden, preparing silverware for their lunch guests.

Christina Deusenberry, Martinsburg District

Asthma has not prevented 27-year-old Christina Deusenberry from becoming a successful pharmacist at West Virginia University Hospitals in Morgantown. DRS provided college financial assistance and counseling and guidance to Christina, who realized the importance of securing her education at a very young age.

Bua-Iam appointed to RSA study group

West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services Senior Manager Pisnu Bua-Iam has been appointed to serve as a member of the 38th Institute on Rehabilitation Issues (IRI). Bua-Iam oversees the DRS State Plan and Program Evaluation Unit.

The IRI is a national forum funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) where the brightest minds from vocational rehabilitation programs across the United States gather to discuss and study important challenges facing federal-state vocational rehabilitation programs.

The RSA annually funds two studies, one at the University of Arkansas and one at George Washington University. Bua-Iam is part of the George Washington University team that is studying the topic of “Return on Investment and Economic Impact: Demonstrating Relevance and Value of Vocational Rehabilitation.” The University of Arkansas team is addressing the topic of “Serving Traditionally Underserved Populations.”

Appointment to the IRI is an honor. Members are chosen for expertise in their field and only ten to twelve members are selected for each study. After the groups have completed their respective reports, the published reports are disseminated nationally and used to train and educate a wide audience of vocational rehabilitation professionals.

Bua-Iam has previously set himself apart in his field by co-authoring with Thomas Bias, Ph.D. two important studies for vocational rehabilitation programs entitled, “Economic Impacts of West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services on Consumers with Significant Disabilities: Realistic Return-on-Investment Models for State-Federal VR Programs,” published in the Journal of Rehabilitation (Volume 77, Number 3) and, “Estimating Work Life Return on Investment of WVDRS Youth and Older Consumers with Significant Disabilities,” published in the Journal of Rehabilitation Administration (Volume 35, Number 1).
West Virginia businesses honored for vocational rehabilitation contributions

DRS annually shows its appreciation to local businesses and employers who support DRS by providing work-related opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Utilizing a nomination process, employers are selected to receive Employer of the Year and Distinguished Employer awards.

These business partnerships are jointly developed and nurtured and serve as the foundation for DRS’ ultimate success. The employers recognized are progressive in their attitudes and they empower people with disabilities by providing them with job opportunities.

One business from each DRS district receives an Employer of the Year award. Each district also presents Distinguished Employer awards through local recognition events.

Charleston District Employer of the Year
United Structural Systems Ltd., Inc., Charleston

Over the past several years, United Structural Systems and DRS have developed a strong partnership. The company has hired several qualified DRS clients for general laborer and crew supervisor positions. United Structural Systems continues to consider DRS client referrals as potential additions to its workforce, providing interview and on-the-job training experience opportunities for many clients.

Distinguished Employer awards presented to other businesses in the district include: Charleston Area Medical Center, Charleston; West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, Charleston; Kmart, Charleston; Foodland, Spencer; and Smith’s Foodfair, Elkhview.

Clarksburg District Employer of the Year
Kmart, Morgantown

DRS and Kmart have maintained a 20-year cooperative relationship, working together to place individuals with disabilities in jobs at this location. Kmart also has opened its doors as a community based assessment site, which provides a short-term job “tryout” with the goal of discovering vocational strengths and weaknesses, for DRS clients.

Distinguished Employer awards presented to other businesses in the district include: Capital Doors, Inc., Fairmont; Aegis Communications Group, Fairmont; and Eastern Pet Supply Outlet, Bridgeport.

Wheeling District Employer of the Year
Bureau of the Public Debt, Department of the Treasury, Parkersburg

The Bureau of the Public Debt and DRS are building a collaborative partnership. The Bureau actively seeks qualified DRS clients as potential job candidates and has hired four clients, thus far. They’ve also held mock interviews with clients to provide positive feedback relating to interviewing skills and are a source of potential job leads for DRS.

Distinguished Employer awards presented to other businesses in the district include: Open Hands Seed Project, The Mentor Network/REM Community Options, Paden City; Ponderosa, Calcutta, Ohio; McDonald’s, Weirton; and Trinity Medical Center West, Steubenville, Ohio.

Beckley District Employer of the Year
The Resort at Glade Springs, Daniels

The Resort at Glade Springs is proving to be an essential partner to DRS. The Resort has hired three individuals who are deaf. Not only are they open to providing necessary worksite accommodations, but a supervisor is learning sign language in order to better communicate with employees with disabilities.

Distinguished Employer awards presented to other businesses in the district include: Dr. Kelly Pitsenbarger, M.D., Beckley; Ashley Food Pride, Union; Walmart Supercenter, MacArthur and Princeton locations; and Value Plus, Oak Hill.

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Huntington District Employer of the Year
West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, Huntington

The Huntington DHHR office utilizes DRS as a referral source for potential employment opportunities. During the past year, they hired three DRS clients through the state’s selective placement program. They have also hired four temporary employees, providing each with an opportunity to be hired permanently.

Distinguished Employer awards presented to other businesses in the district include: Chili’s Grill & Bar Restaurant, Barboursville; Griffith & Feil Pharmacy, Kenova; Logan Regional Medical Center, Logan; Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College, Williamson; and Williamson Memorial Hospital, Williamson.

Martinsburg District Employer of the Year
Grant Memorial Hospital, Petersburg

Grant Memorial Hospital has a long-standing history of working with DRS. They frequently use DRS as a potential referral source for employment opportunities within their hospital and they are open to working with DRS clients who may need assistance in adapting to a specific job.

Distinguished Employer awards presented to other businesses in the district include: Glory Days Grill, Ranson; West Virginia Weight and Wellness, Inc., Martinsburg; Federal Express Smart Post, Martinsburg; American Red Cross, Kearneysville; and T.J. Maxx, Martinsburg.

STEP program “best practice” example to other states

Frustration can lead to apathy, disinterest and defeat. But, in this case, feelings of frustration resulted in determination, action and change that is helping West Virginia students get jobs.

Jeff McCroskey coordinates the Work Exploration Program for Kanawha County Schools. Several years ago, he became frustrated because some kids were leaving the school system and falling through the cracks. They needed some additional help to transition from school to the world of work.

He knew that many of these students had already developed strong working relationships with some of their teachers. But, he needed a way for students to be able to continue working with these teachers after they left the school system.

He developed an idea to train interested teachers to become vendors that could provide additional transition services to eligible students.

The School Transition to Employment Program (STEP) began in 2007 with grant money provided by the West Virginia Developmental Disabilities Council. Funds were granted to Community Access, Inc., a nonprofit organization that McCroskey started several years before to address other unmet needs in transition-related services for students with disabilities.

McCroskey sought buy-in from the Division of Rehabilitation Services from the beginning and the program continues today with grant funding provided by DRS.

According to LuAnn Summers, rehabilitation program manager who oversees the community rehabilitation programs for DRS, “Jeff proposed a really unique idea. DRS is one of the few vocational rehabilitation agencies in the country that can recognize a sole proprietor as a vendor or a fee-for-service provider.”

“This flexibility or ability to think outside of the box has led to this program’s success,” said Summers.

Training has been provided to interested teachers in 15 West Virginia counties. Students are referred to the

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program and to DRS by the school system. Once a student is determined to be eligible for DRS services, DRS can hire a trained teacher as a vendor to provide needed job development, direct placement or job coaching services to the student.

“The program often allows students to work one-on-one with teachers that they are already comfortable with,” said McCroskey. “It works best if the student is determined eligible for the program and DRS by the end of their Junior year. This increases their ultimate success.”

So far, 73 students have been placed into jobs, demonstrating the effectiveness of the program.

In January 2012, STEP was selected as a case study by the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston. The Institute is doing research on and will highlight different state vocational rehabilitation agency practices that result in improving employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

STEP is one of only two best practices in the area of transitioning from school to work selected by the research panel from nominations submitted from vocational rehabilitation agencies throughout the country. Researchers have interviewed McCroskey, Summers and two teachers participating in the program. Outcomes will be shared with other state vocational rehabilitation and partner agencies throughout the country.

McCroskey would like to see this program replicated in other states.

“Some states are restricted by rules and policies that may pose problems with initiating a similar program,” said McCroskey. “But, those rules and policies can be changed to allow flexibility in creating a program that will help students with disabilities achieve the ultimate goal of employment success.”

Federal reports indicate that the West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services performance exceeds that of other state vocational rehabilitation programs in many areas.

The federal Rehabilitation Act requires that all 56 of the General and Combined rehabilitation agencies in the United States be evaluated each year and meet seven performance standards. DRS is a General and Combined rehabilitation agency because it serves individuals who are blind and visually impaired as well as individuals with other disabilities.

Not only did DRS meet all of these requirements, but it also ranked first in the percentage of individuals achieving an employment outcome out of the 56 General and Combined agencies, excluding the territories.

According to reports from the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration, DRS was one of only 16 of these agencies to meet (and exceed) all seven of these standards in fiscal year 2011. Not only did DRS meet all of these requirements, but it also ranked first in the percentage of individuals achieving an employment outcome out of the 56 General and Combined agencies, excluding the territories.

This is a remarkable accomplishment considering the difficult economic times throughout the nation and the dislocation and hasty relocation of the DRS Administrative Offices and the Charleston District Office during the fiscal year.

“I am very proud to be a part of this agency,” said DRS Acting Director Donna Ashworth. “Our continued success is accomplished by the contributions of our dedicated employees!”

The numbers show this dedication. In fiscal year 2011, 2,537 individuals with disabilities achieved an employment outcome which is 368 more than the previous year. This means that 74.3 percent of the individuals who received vocational rehabilitation services and exited the program this year achieved employment outcomes.

Of the individuals who achieved an employment outcome, 98.7 percent earn at least minimum wage which is 26.1 percent more than the federal requirement. Out of these individuals earning
at least minimum wage, 86.38 percent have significant disabilities meaning they have a permanent physical or mental condition that limits functional capacity and requires multiple vocational rehabilitation services for at least six months.

Of the 56 General and Combined agencies, DRS ranked sixth on the earnings ratio standard, which compares the average earnings of individuals who received services and make at least minimum wage to the average earnings of all workers in the state.

Clearly, DRS performance demonstrates that it is meeting its mission of enabling and empowering West Virginians with disabilities to work and live independently.

The federal Rehabilitation Act requires all state vocational rehabilitation agencies to have a Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD). The CSPD provision of the federal law provides flexibility to each state to define and meet its needs for training, upgrading, recruiting and continuing development of qualified and competent vocational rehabilitation professionals in order to continually improve services to and employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

“This annual training event is just one DRS initiative that enables us to meet federal CSPD requirements for continued development of qualified rehabilitation professionals,” said Human Resources Senior Manager Ann Kautz. “It gives our employees the opportunity to stay current in the various specialized areas within vocational rehabilitation and to network with their peers.”

A highlight of this year’s conference was Greg Smith, a professional speaker, coach and author, who presented the skills and lessons he has learned from his lifelong battles against physical disabilities and social stigma. Other training topics related to substance abuse, job realities for individuals who have felony charges, coping strategies for working in the helping field and using the ACT in vocational planning.
**DRS hosts Transition Conference**

DRS hosted a training conference for its transition counselors June 12-13 at the Charleston Conference Center. Transition counselors assist high school students with disabilities with planning and preparing for a seamless transition from high school into appropriate vocational training, post-secondary education or employment.

“DRS serves a large number of transition students. During fiscal year 2011, 46 percent of the individuals served by DRS were transition students,” said Acting Director Donna L. Ashworth. “For this reason, it’s very important that our counselors stay up-to-date on current practices and policies relating to the type of services and assistance these individuals are going to need to prepare for their future.”

The training provided updates in the areas of financial aid, vocational assessments, assistive technology, the I/DD Waiver program, labor market information, depression in youth, autism and DRS policies to 85 counselors, managers, quality assurance specialists and other staff.


**Study shows GIS technology enhances outreach efforts**

The Division of Rehabilitation Services continuously strives to effectively reach potential clients in the most efficient way.

The DRS State Plan and Program Evaluation Unit recently had a study published in the Journal of Rehabilitation Administration (Volume 36, Number 1). Senior Manager Pisnu Bua-Iam and Todd Sink, Ph.D. and research specialist, co-authored the study “Maximizing Needs Assessment Outcomes for Public Vocational Rehabilitation Programs: Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to Reach Consumers from Minority Backgrounds.”

This study focuses on how state vocational rehabilitation programs can use Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to find unserved and underserved minority populations in order to more efficiently and cost effectively disseminate DRS informational and promotional materials to these potential clients. GIS allows vocational rehabilitation agencies to locate unserved minority areas, refine the search to the optimum target area (the area with the highest minority concentration) and to reach these minorities by distributing DRS fliers to them at saturation rate.

Using this method, vocational rehabilitation agencies can now reduce the number of fliers they send out while still reaching an optimum number of potential clients. The study also shows that this practice can be used at vocational rehabilitation agencies across the United States and can cut outreach costs by as much as 71 percent.

The Journal of Rehabilitation Administration is a prestigious journal associated with the National Association of Rehabilitation Leadership and published out of Southern Illinois University. The journal publishes papers related to management, organizational and administration issues within the field of rehabilitation.
Bob Thompson, Jazz Pianist, played the national anthem.