



# ***Investing in America***



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The **NET**  
NATIONAL EMPLOYMENT TEAM

# VR at Work

Vocational Rehabilitation

## VR Customer to Counselor

Cory Richo first connected with the Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) while he was in high school. DORS provided supports to help him attend college. At that time he was paralyzed. However, three months after his graduation from the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, Cory also lost his vision. He contacted DORS again to get services to help him adjust to blindness.

When asked about adjusting to blindness while also having to use a wheelchair, Cory said "You find ways to overcome it. I had already faced losing [mobility] so I knew how to move on."

Cory found that, since losing his sight, he needed to improve his computer skills, so he enrolled in Office Technology training at DORS' Workforce & Technology Center (WTC). He graduated from WTC in 2010 and began his job search.

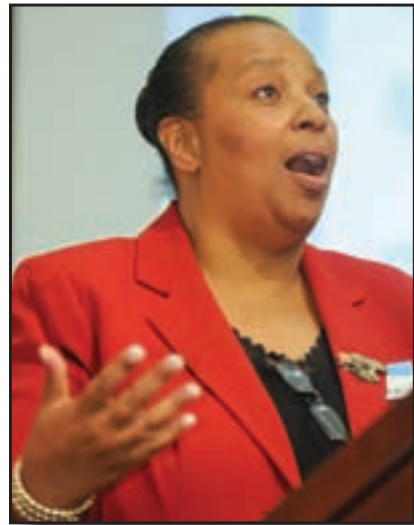
To build his resume, Cory did a few internships, including one at DORS. He also went back to college and earned his Master's degree in 2014. Cory's connections to DORS helped him when he applied for a position as a Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselor in DORS' Eastern Baltimore County office. "I was asked at the interview what I had in my background that would help me relate to DORS mission. I told them 'I have a disability and I know the [DORS] process.'"

Despite his background and connections, Cory had to beat out a lot of competition. More than 600 candidates applied for three openings and only 50 were chosen for interviews.

Cory says he was thrilled when he got the call offering him the position. "The HR person asked if I was still interested. I said 'I am! I am!'"

Cory recently celebrated his one-year anniversary as a DORS VR counselor. He is unique in that he is a VR counselor in DORS' Office of Field Services (OFS) and is completely blind. His caseload includes consumers with a variety of disabilities, but not blindness. DORS' Office for Blindness & Vision Services has several counselors who are blind, but Cory is the first in OFS.

"I really enjoy it. It's a tough job, but I have a passion to help people with disabilities to see that they can live full lives. No one is absolutely independent – we all need help. We find what we can do and we use that to flow and move forward and succeed."



## Supporting an Enterprising Spirit

Valerie Jones, RN of Newport News, Virginia now owns her own successful home healthcare agency as a result of the services received from the Virginia Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS). Her business, "All Ways There Home Care", trains Personal Care Attendants, Certified Nursing Assistants, Medication Aides and hires individuals to work for her home health care patients. Valerie's company provides effective care with dignity and compassion to individuals in their homes with her staff of qualified nurses and health care providers.

Valerie is a nurse by training, and was injured while on the job at Eastern State Hospital. As a result, she was unable to return to the demanding and physical requirements of nursing, so she set out on a course to use her talents and skills to open her own business.

Through the assistance of DARS and their self employment enterprise program, Valerie was provided with business training, marketing assistance, supplies and start up services to launch "All Ways There Home Care". In addition to the healthcare agency, she is a master trainer and program coordinator for Medication Aide through her training and consulting business "V. Jones Enterprise".

Valerie's hard work, determination and collaboration with DARS made her business venture come true.



## Job Driven Training and Employment

Lupe taught a sign language course for students, teachers, and others to help them communicate with him. This is just one example of the community of support surrounding Lupe.

Lupe's community of support expanded when he enrolled in LifeLink in Scottsbluff. This transition program provides opportunities for students with disabilities, ages 18-21, to prepare for employment and independent living. Lupe had a goal of becoming a welder like his brother, so he enrolled in the Western Nebraska Community College (WNCC) welding program. Using a classroom interpreter, he took Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes to improve his reading and communication skills.

Randy Thurston, ABE instructor at WNCC, worked alongside his interpreter to help Lupe learn American Sign Language and written English. It wasn't always easy and Randy reports that sometimes it was very discouraging. But, they celebrated accomplishments such as when Lupe learned how to communicate with the HandiBus to schedule transportation. Welding instructor, Dean Rindels, also worked closely to support Lupe, describing him as "always happy, with a twinkle in his eye, and friends with everyone."

Throughout Lupe's journey, Nebraska VR has been at the center of his community of support. They assisted with career planning and evaluation in high school; provided financial assistance for college, tools and transportation, purchased an iPad and other devices for communication and independent living through the Assistive Technology Partnership, and provided placement and on-the-job training services. Nebraska VR Specialist Nicole Fisher notes, "There was a tremendous amount of coordination between programs, it was truly a community effort." Lupe graduated from WNCC with a Certificate in Welding and recently completed on-the-job training as a welder at Scottsbluff Industries, where he now works full time. Gunther Koob at Scottsbluff Industries recalls that he initially had concerns about employing Lupe. One related to safety due to his hearing impairment and the other was communication. Lupe now works in an area where safety concerns are addressed and a co-worker and interpreter worked together to develop methods of communicating with him. What's next? Lupe says he wants to "be the best employee he can be" and continue to learn welding skills. Lupe has certainly proven that with determination and a community of support, there are many possibilities!



There is a consistent theme when talking with others about Lupe Valle. Everyone mentions his smile. However, Lupe's success has come through hard work, determination, and a strong community of support. As a child growing up in Texas, he had little formal education or training. When he moved to Nebraska at age 15, he had few communication, reading, and math skills. As the only deaf person when he enrolled in Kimball High School, he needed an interpreter but had no sign language skills. He advocated for an interpreter to help him be a member of the football team. In addition to assisting Lupe directly, interpreter Connie Dietrich,



# Business Partnerships



## Starbucks— A Corporate Partnership with Global Impact

Starbucks Corporation is a global company headquartered in Seattle, WA. The company has always had a focus on their work at the local and community level as well as nationally and globally. “The company’s mission is to inspire and nurture the human spirit – one person, one cup, and one neighborhood at a time.”

Starbucks recognizes the importance of diversity in communities and the workplace, including individuals with disabilities. Their diversity and inclusion partnerships include the National Employment Team (NET) of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and the U.S. Business Leadership Network (USBLN), a business to business organization that has a strategic alliance with the NET.

### THE STARBUCKS INCLUSION ACADEMY: A PARTNERSHIP WITH VR

The Inclusion Academy is the result of a year-long collaboration between Starbucks and Nevada VR. The training takes place at Starbucks largest distribution center in Carson Valley, NV.

Starbucks provides the training space at the plant and instructors. Nevada VR refers candidates to the program, funds the instructor’s salary and pays candidates during their training. Participants receive three hours of classroom instruction and three hours of work each day for the first four weeks. In the final two weeks, candidates complete an internship in the Starbucks facility.

“The program has opened a lot of eyes,” said Todd McCullough, senior operations manager at the Starbucks facility. “Supervisors and partners look past disabilities and realize we all have different abilities in the workplace.”

Eli was one of seven Nevada VR trainees that graduated in the first Starbucks Inclusion Academy in October 2014. After the graduation Eli applied for a job at the distribution facility and became a full time partner at Starbucks.

The success of the Inclusion Academy in Nevada has inspired the development of similar program in the York, Pennsylvania plant. PA-VR and Starbucks have identified 20 potential trainees for the 2015 program. Two hires have already occurred. This partnership expanded to other areas of the business as well. At least four of PA-VR’s



*Eli receiving his graduation certificate from Nevada’s Governor Sandoval.*

candidates have been employed in Starbucks retail locations in Pennsylvania.

In Washington State both VR agencies (general and blind) are working with Starbucks to increase the hiring and retention of partners with disabilities in retail, distribution and at the corporate level. The Kent, WA Roasting Plant recently hired a VR referral as a Maintenance Supervisor and additional candidates are in the pipeline. Hires also occurred at the Starbucks Corporate office, including Caroline Czerepak, an Accounting Specialist in Customer Financial Services who is deaf.

### EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES BRING CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION TO STARBUCKS

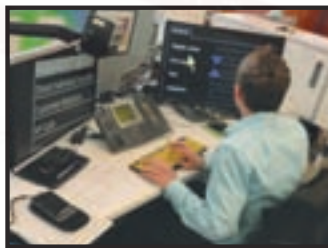
“Starbucks means everything to me. I want to do as much for the company as it has done for me. Starbucks has helped me become the person I am today.”

Rhea Elsen began her journey as a Starbucks barista eight years ago. Rhea recalls her sense of accomplishment when Starbucks hired her after about 20 job rejections from other businesses. Rhea had come a long way from being the five-year old girl with a disability caused by the polio virus, who was adopted from an orphanage in India. She has since become a Starbucks Coffee Master,

celebrated her 8th anniversary with the company and recently started working in the company’s headquarters. Ultimately, she’d like to be a Starbucks job recruiter and offer support to others with disabilities.



*Rhea Elsen*



*Kristopher Harper—receptionist*

“As a partner I feel I have

a chance to make a difference, and I have met so many other partners who have the same passion to make a difference and leave the world a better place.”

While working as an assistant store manager at Starbucks, Kristopher noticed changes to his eyesight. Within two weeks he lost nearly all of his central vision and became blind due to a hereditary medical condition.

Starbucks worked with Kristopher and received assistance from VR to provide accommodations that helped him to do his work with a vision loss. Kristopher transitioned to the Starbucks Support Center as part of the corporate facilities team. He is also on the leadership board for Starbucks employee resource group, the Access Alliance.

### STARBUCKS CORPORATE LEADERSHIP

“Starbucks recognizes disability inclusion as not only the right thing to do, but also a business imperative. Partners [employees] of all abilities are coming together around the shared human experience of disabilities. They make me proud to be a Starbucks partner and proud to be a Peaberry.”  
A Peaberry is an agricultural defect in a coffee cherry.



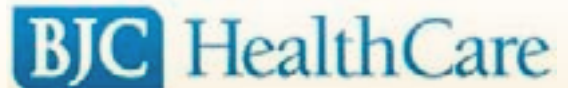
*Jessica Rafuse, manager, EO Initiatives, Law & Corporate Affairs*

In 5 to 10 percent of all coffee cherries, only one, more rounded bean develops, rather than two beans side-by-side. The Peaberry was historically discarded by some coffee roasters. The Peaberry was viewed as damaged, flawed and less valuable. However, today we know the Peaberry is more desirable

because the round shape allows for more uniform and consistent roasting. Coffee Masters prefer the Peaberry for its concentrated and unique flavors.

Jessica believes that like the Peaberry, people with disabilities have often been undervalued. The word “disability” historically suggested a defect or flaw. Too often, society focuses on the difficulties of physical and mental conditions. However, Jessica encourages others to rethink disability and fully appreciate the unique assets that make people with disabilities a premium in the workplace.

Jessica was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy at the age of 8. While Jessica’s muscles weakened, she focused on strengthening her mind. She adapted to her changing abilities by reading books, writing essays, learning more, and working hard. She became an Attorney, Administrative Judge, a Starbucks partner, and a wheelchair user. Jessica decided to pursue a career at Starbucks because of her admiration for the company’s mission, values, and commitment to appreciating the strengths and abilities of its employees. Jessica and the EO team are responsible for removing barriers to employment for applicants and partners of all backgrounds, including women, minorities, veterans and people with disabilities.



BJC is leading the way by providing employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Their commitment to a diverse workforce led them to partner with Missouri Vocational Rehabilitation and the National Employment Team (NET). They are one of early adopters, subscribing to the Talent Acquisition Portal (TAP). This partnership has already yielded very promising results through employee retention services and recruitment efforts.



# ***The Public Vocational Rehabilitation Program***

## ***Working with Business to Provide Competitive Integrated Employment Opportunities and Careers for Individuals with Disabilities***

- Created in 1920, the Public Vocational Rehabilitation Program has worked with public and private-sector businesses to assist more than 19 million individuals with disabilities acquire, maintain or advance in competitive integrated employment.
- The program, which exists in all states, territories, and the District of Columbia, is one of the oldest and most productive and accountable employment programs in the country.
- In FFY 2013 1,001,814 individuals with disabilities applied for VR services.
- As part of the overall number served in FFY 2013, 340,735 individuals worked with a VR counselor to develop a new Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). An IPE is comprehensive and individually focused and includes multiple services that lead to and support the independence and employment of individuals served by the VR program.
- Of those individuals under an IPE, 182,696 obtained competitive integrated employment at or above minimum wage in professional, technical, sales and service occupations, to name a few. This is an increase of 2.5% in the number of individuals who obtained competitive integrated employment in FFY 2012.
- The average length of time individuals participate in VR services is 24 months.
- The public VR program is working with business across the country through the National Employment Team (NET). The NET was formed through business partners who employ individuals with disabilities in the public and private sectors. The NET offers a wide range of services to support business customers, in addition to access to the broad range of qualified candidates supported by VR in every state, the territories and the District of Columbia.
- The Talent Acquisition Portal or TAP is an online tool developed in partnership with business, individuals with disabilities and CSAVR's technology partner, disABLED-person, Inc. TAP enables VR candidates to connect with employers based on their job categories and geographic preference. TAP also offers the capacity for online interviews, educational career planning sessions and hiring events. The TAP platform is fully accessible.
- Given the challenging economic times that have existed, some states have not been able to serve all eligible individuals who apply for services. In these instances state VR agencies must give priority to individuals with the most significant disabilities.
- Staffing challenges, and in some states the inability to garner full state match from state legislatures for the federal VR funds, negatively impacts a state VR Agency's ability to assist more individuals with disabilities in reducing their dependence on income supports and achieving competitive integrated employment at or above minimum wage.
- Billions of dollars are spent by the federal government annually on providing income supports, including those provided to individuals with disabilities.
- The public VR program which puts people to work, making them taxpayers as opposed to tax recipients, and provides more funding in tax revenues for all levels of government, is only funded at 3.5 billion.
- How can we work with Congress to change this paradigm?