# Background

The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) has an advisory role in shaping the Department of Rehabilitation’s (DOR) upcoming modification to the 2024 – 27 Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services Portion of the California Unified State Plan (State Plan). The SRC has a dedicated section in the State Plan that outlines the SRC’s membership composition and presents the SRC’s input and policy recommendations for strengthening the VR program.

To guide their development of meaningful input, the SRC State Plan Committee approved seven stakeholder engagement questions during its April 22, 2025 meeting. These questions were designed to solicit feedback from a broad range of stakeholders on the strengths, challenges, and opportunities within California’s VR service delivery system.

Following the SRC State Plan Committee’s approval, the SRC Executive Officer distributed the seven questions via email to the SRC’s stakeholder listserv. SRC members also disseminated the questions through their own networks and engaged in discussions during their “Adopt-a-District” meetings with DOR Regional Directors and District Administrators. Additional feedback was shared by SRC members during the July 29, 2025 State Plan Committee meeting.

This document summarizes the stakeholder feedback received as of July 29, 2025. The SRC will draw upon this feedback to inform its recommendations and policy input for inclusion in the State Plan modification, which is due in December 2025.

# 1. What are the biggest barriers individuals with disabilities currently face in obtaining and maintaining competitive integrated employment? What solutions could help reduce or eliminate these barriers?

Responses from DOR Districts

* Getting buy-in from businesses to hire consumers with disabilities is a barrier. A solution could be providing outreach and training to businesses.
* Persistent stigma among employers and employer bias
* Lack of stable housing
* Limited natural support systems (family, community networks)
* Challenges accessing healthcare coverage
* Many clients lack essential soft skills such as communication, time management, and workplace etiquette.
* Vocational services are not always aligned with the individual’s strengths or labor market demands.
* insufficient exploration of alternative career paths, especially those aligned with current workforce trends.

Responses from Independent Living Centers

* There is an overall lack of opportunities given by the private sector to individuals with disabilities.
* Ensure that consumers understand the hiring processes for various types of employers.
* Prepare consumers to ask questions during the interview about the job and work environment.
* Establish communication between the employer and DOR so the consumer can get on-the-job support and accommodations.

Responses from Community Partners

* Many consumers lack soft skills like communication, time management, and workplace etiquette.
* Start employment preparation with a strong focus on soft skills and provide consumers with opportunities to practice their soft skills.
* Some consumers can feel overwhelmed by the different services and navigating how to access them.
* Interviews are traditionally based on verbal communication skills which can be a barrier for individuals who are neurodivergent.
* Many consumers fear that becoming employed will result in losing housing vouchers, SSI/SSDI benefits, and Medi-Care coverage.
* Historically a barrier has been whether or not to disclose you have a disability.
* Offer targeted skill-building. Provide opportunities for consumers to participate in programs that focus on developing specific skills instead of just funding degrees and certifications. Some consumers need a foundation of skills to succeed in school and the workforce.

# 2. Are there specific disability groups or underserved populations that need greater access to VR services?

Responses from DOR Districts

* Black and Latinx consumers
* Youth with experience in the foster care or justice system
* Individuals with low incomes
* Individuals with substance‑use disorders
* Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID/DD)
* Refugees from Asian countries, including Afghan and Iranian communities
* Tribal youth

Responses from Independent Living Centers

* Individuals with intellectual developmental disabilities
* Individuals with traumatic brain injuries
* Individuals with mental health disabilities
* Individuals who have recently acquired a disability

Responses from Community Partners

* Individuals impacted by the justice system
* Individuals experiencing homelessness
* Individuals with experience in the foster care system
* Individuals with behavioral health disabilities

Responses from the Client Assistance Program

* Native American consumers
* LGBTQ+ consumers
* Individuals with traumatic brain injuries
* Individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing

# 3. What specific areas of VR service delivery need improvement (examples: timeliness, accessibility, effectiveness, consumer choice, etc.)? What improvements could be made?

Responses from DOR Districts:

* Volume: Managing the increase of referrals is challenging for staff. There isn’t enough person power and resources to do the work quickly. Referrals could be processed quicker by hiring more grad students and interns for the DOR offices. processing online referrals still lags due to high volume.
* Case management: Intake interviews need to be more effective at capturing relevant details about the person’s disability and job goals. Plan development takes too long, especially for those pursuing college-level training, which can extend services up to eight years.
* Communication and engagement: Many consumers drop out due to low engagement or poor follow-up, which may indicate they don’t see value in staying connected to DOR.
* Access: there is a need to increase the number of available ASL interpreters.

Responses from Independent Living Centers

* Effectiveness of services
* Consumer choice
* There is a need to increase partnerships and communication between local DOR offices and independent living centers.

Responses from Community Partners

* Consumers wait too long to get their case open and receive services.
* There is a need for systems to track outcomes and feedback so services can continuously improve.
* Consumer Choice: Let consumers have more say in which service providers they work with and give them more options when it comes to choosing vocational paths.
* Hire and retain more skilled staff to make services more responsive.
* Build stronger partnerships with universities and nonprofits to expand the talent pool for rehabilitation counselors.
* Streamline service delivery so it’s more efficient and focused on what people actually need.

Responses from the Client Assistance Program

* Develop more vendors and Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs) to improve service delivery by streamlining the process for approving CRPs and Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) accreditation. Consider allowing exceptions to contract with Individual Service Providers (ISPs).
* In addition to prioritizing the recruitment of DOR Counselors, also prioritize the recruitment of vacant DOR case support staff like Business Specialists, Medical Consultants, Consulting Psychologists, and Work Incentive Planners.
* Increase the utilization of extended services for youth with the most significant disabilities.
* Expand the pool of vendors that can provide customized employment services.
* Provide regular updates on the phase out of subminimum wage.

# 4. How can DOR’s strengthen partnerships with employers?

Responses provided by DOR Districts:

* Provide disability‑etiquette training to employers.
* Canvass the community and build relationships with local businesses.
* Provide training and outreach to businesses to encourage them to hire people with disabilities.
* Highlight the benefits and supports that are available to employers. DOR can provide assistive technology, etiquette training, tax credits, and reasonable accommodations.
* Employers need to see a clear return on their partnership with DOR, such as reduced recruitment costs or improved productivity. DOR could create a team that acts like a job placement agency or talent scout, helping employers find skilled workers at little to no cost.

Responses from Independent Living Centers

* Increase face-to-face contact between DOR and employers.
* Go to events, meetings and other activities where employers and service agencies are gathering.
* DOR staff need to meet the local employers and talk about the employment services they offer for DOR consumers.
* Explain to employers that the onset of a disability happens at any age, meaning many consumers had careers before and have a strong work ethic, and can be great employees in their new career.

Responses from Community Partners

* Promote incentives available to businesses like the Work Opportunity Tax Credit and wage reimbursement programs.
* Host employer forums and recognition events to share success stories and build connections.
* Work with trade associations, chambers of commerce, and industry groups to make disability hiring a core part of workforce conversations.
* Develop and implement training programs for employers focused on recognizing and mitigating interview biases, particularly toward neurodivergent candidates.
* Encourage the adoption of skills-based interview formats to provide a more equitable assessment of candidate abilities, rather than depending just on verbal interviews.
* Provide employers with resources and examples that illustrate how neurodivergent individuals may present differently, to foster more inclusive hiring practices.
* Provide dedicated funding to support employer engagement, recognizing that some DOR staff may lack the capacity or network to drive effective business development.
* Consider assigning dedicated counselors to specific employer engagement programs to enhance consistency and build stronger partnerships.
* Allocate resources for marketing, outreach, and business development, recognizing the extended timeframes required to build business partnerships.
* Institutionalize and fund mock interview events in partnership with industry professionals to increase employer awareness and improve hiring outcomes for neurodivergent individuals.

Responses from the Client Assistance Program

* Prioritize filling DOR’s Business Specialist and Regional Business Specialist vacancies.

# 5. How can DOR encourage more employers to offer internships, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training opportunities?

Examples provided by DOR Districts:

* Offer disability‑etiquette sessions, develop partnerships with community colleges, participate in apprenticeship fairs.
* Canvass the community and encourage local employers to offer work experience and job training opportunities to individuals with disabilities.
* Provide businesses with information on available tax credits. Explain to employers that DOR can provide funding for internships and workers compensation insurance for 2 – 3 months.
* Get buy-in from employers that may have HR and/or legal concerns. Some employers may need etiquette training to reduce negative perceptions.
* Highlight the benefits employers receive from partnering with DOR, like increased support, recognition, and access to a pipeline of motivated, trained individuals. Frame these partnerships as opportunities to improve their business while supporting diversity and inclusion.

Responses from Independent Living Centers

* Make the application process easier and more comprehensive for prospective employers or volunteer agencies.
* Partner with labor unions, workforce development boards, adult education programs, chambers of commerce, small business development centers, and similar programs. Ensure these organizations know what services DOR provides.
* Provide employers with information and support on how to effectively implement reasonable accommodations.

Responses from Community Partners

* Use social media and community partners to connect with a broader range of employers.
* Offer hands-on support to help employers set up inclusive programs that work for everyone.

Responses from the Client Assistance Program

* Develop a pool of DOR clients who have skills and training that align with regional hiring needs.
* Incentivize providers and partners to serve rural areas and culturally diverse populations.

# 6. Are there policies that limit the effectiveness of VR services? If so, what are they?

Examples provided by DOR Districts

* The requirement that DOR must utilize institutions that are accredited by the Bureau for Private Postsecondary Education (BPPE) limits funding for private training programs.
* Current regulations limit the use of private schools.
* The policies around career advancement are unclear, especially when a consumer wants to pursue a different vocational goal or lacks related job history. More guidance is needed on how to support upward mobility in these situations.

Responses from Community Partners

* The system is still too slow and bureaucratic. Delays in case processing, eligibility decisions, and vendor payments can hold consumers up for weeks or even months.
* Some policies require outdated or excessive documentation.
* There are not enough qualified providers in rural or underserved areas, so even when someone is eligible, they may not have access to services.
* Current policies should be amended to enable DOR to contract with third-party providers for employer engagement and outreach.

Responses from the Client Assistance Program

* Reduce the volume of documentation required to provide DOR consumers with computers and internet access, both of which are needed to prepare a resume and search for jobs.
* Prioritize and encourage advanced training, work experience and educational degree attainment for DOR consumers. Provide DOR staff with training on this topic. Update policies to reflect that DOR consumers should be encouraged to maximize their employment potential through work experience, advanced training and educational degree attainment.
* Train DOR Counselors on how to provide supported employment services to a broader range of populations, including individuals with behavioral health disabilities, individuals with traumatic brain injuries, individuals with significant disabilities, and youth with disabilities who may need extended services.
* Clarify in DOR’s policies that supported employment services can be provided up to 24 months and are not capped at 90 days after successful case closure.

# 7. What innovative strategies, programs, or technologies should be adopted to improve VR services?

Examples provided by DOR Districts

* Use generative AI to streamline documentation, reduce administrative work for counselors, and speed up plan development and service delivery.
* Build a system that fully supports virtual service delivery from application to employment.
* Offer more training for DOR staff.
* Invest in communication tools to better engage consumers.
* Partner with schools, workforce boards, and training centers to offer programs that match current job demands.
* Improve DOR staff recruitment and retention.
* Improve customer service and responsiveness at every step.

Responses from Independent Living Centers

* Implement the order of selection for services.
* Encourage creativity and innovation from DOR staff.
* Encourage consumers to pursue career paths in emerging fields.

Responses from Community Partners

* Expand the use of assistive technology, like virtual coaching platforms.
* Launch pilot programs that offer peer mentorship, mental health support, and wraparound services.
* Simplify documentation requirements.
* Incentivize providers to work in rural areas through higher pay or remote service models.
* Improve provider training. Ongoing education helps ensure that providers are ready to meet the needs of diverse consumers.
* Establish standardized turnaround times and service delivery expectations across DOR Districts to increase consistency.