



Overview

The Florida Department of Education’s Division of Vocational Rehabilitation administers the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program, **Florida’s employment service for people with disabilities**. The division maintains 90 offices across the state and has 931 employees.

VR is a federal/state partnership that helps people who have physical or mental disabilities get or keep a job. Our mission is “to help people with disabilities find and maintain employment, and enhance their independence.”



VR customer Michael Sardinas, who has cerebral palsy, works as an IT assistant for Tampa Crossroads. He repairs office computers to ensure that all 60 employees are electronically connected.

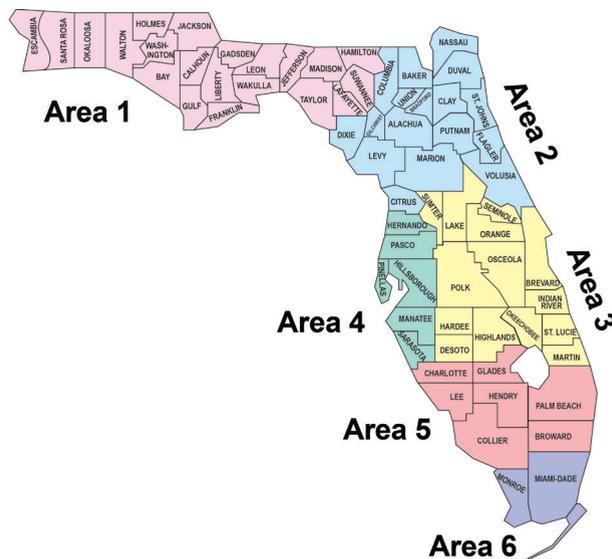
S T O R I E S

Name	Page
Thomas Koch – Clearwater	4
Latoya Bristor – Tampa	5
Joseph Show – Tallahassee	6
Kathy Batson - Sunrise	7
Corey North - Daytona Beach	8
Kevin Durden- Ocala	9
Cristy Segura – Miami	10
Mark Carstens – Orange City	11
Eddie Trujillo- Homestead	12
Judi Page – Tallahassee	13
Pierre Garnaud – Ft. Lauderdale	14
Robert Halliburton – Orlando	15

Facts

- » One focus of VR is transitioning students from school to work. VR helps students with disabilities train for a job, continue their education, and/or find a job after high school.
- » Three additional programs receive funding through VR. The **Independent Living Program** provides services through a statewide network of private non-profit, non-residential, locally-based, and consumer-controlled Centers for Independent Living. The **Florida Alliance for Assistive Services and Technology (FAAST)** provides assistive technology products and services. **The Able Trust** partners with VR on “High School-High Tech” to provide transition services to high school students with disabilities.
- » According to the 2014 American Community Survey Year Estimate, there are more than 2.4 million Floridians age 16 and over who have a disability. Of those, only 18%, or 443,570, are employed.

VR Area Map



Thomas Koch

Clearwater



When Thomas Koch took a trip to the Sonny Carter Training Facility and watched the divers training astronauts underwater, he immediately knew he wanted to become

an open water scuba instructor – but not just any scuba instructor. Thomas dreamed of teaching other people who are deaf how to scuba dive.

After 20 years and a little help from VR, he got his wish. Thomas is now the owner of Aqua Hands, a diving school that offers instructors who are fluent in ASL to train students who are deaf.

When Thomas first came to VR for help in 2010, VR provided interpreting services so he could complete his course work to become an Open Water Scuba Instructor. When his training was completed, he opened Aqua Hands in Key Largo. After five years of teaching, Thomas has acquired enough teaching hours to reach the Master Scuba Diver Trainer Instructor level.

Thomas recently needed some additional help from VR, so VR set him up with VRI (Video Relay Interpreter) technology. This is a TV screen that Thomas uses to call a live interpreter. The system is similar to Skype.

Thomas' business continues to grow and flourish; he now has nine independent contractors who work with him. He is grateful for the chance to help others each day. "I like that I can provide this service for people who are deaf, because some scuba instructors are not willing to teach them," he says. "More and more people who use ASL are taking the classes, and soon we will be training instructors who are deaf."

Latoya Bristor

Tampa



Latoya Bristor is thrilled with her new job as a cook's assistant with one of Tampa's long-standing family food establishments, Wright's Gourmet Deli. It was a long and winding road to

employment, but she never gave up hope. "You have to keep fighting for what you want," says Latoya.

Latoya, who has an intellectual disability, came to VR in 2006. She met with VR Counselor Carol Manalo, and together they charted her course to employment.

Her breakthrough came in 2012 when she began a one-year culinary training program at Brewster Technical Institute in Tampa where she really seemed to come alive. She did so well in the program they offered her a one-year internship before she even graduated.

While she was at Brewster, Latoya was referred to The Diversity Initiative's Supported Employment program where she learned how to apply, dress, and interview for a job. Her job coach, Mellisa Bryan, helped Latoya prepare for an interview at Wright's, and she began working there in 2014.

Deli Manager Jeff Mount says Latoya has been a great addition to their staff. "Everyone loves Latoya because she is such a good soul and has great focus. She's also eager to please, hardworking, and is always early for her job. Latoya has so much enthusiasm; you can't help but be upbeat around her."

Latoya is grateful for her job and for the people who helped her achieve success in the workplace. "VR helped me grow up in life and be what I wanted to be," says Latoya. "I would recommend this program to everybody."

Joseph Show

Tallahassee



“When I was younger, doctors told my parents that I would never graduate high school or hold a job or live on my own,” says Joseph Show, who has Asperger’s syndrome and ADHD.

“Thank goodness we didn’t listen to them.”

Joseph didn’t allow the doctors’ words to affect the goals he set for himself. He became determined to attend college, so he came to VR for help achieving his dream.

He met with VR Counselor Lynn Picolo to create a career plan. Joseph was interested in technology, so he decided to study computer science. After four years of hard work, he graduated from Florida State University with honors, becoming the first person in his family to earn a bachelor’s degree.

After graduation, it took 18 months for Joseph to find the right job, but now he’s working for Keith Rowe at Cornerstone Software Services. He is a software developer, responsible for several mission-critical websites at the Department of Health.

Keith has seen a remarkable improvement in Joseph. “We went from helping him frequently to providing him direction and letting him do it himself,” says Keith. “We offered him a raise.”

Lynn is proud to witness Joseph’s progress. “Over the years, I saw a young man, who was very timid, blossom into a very confident adult,” she says.

Joseph loves his job and is glad that Lynn pushed him to do his best work. “She did an excellent job in helping me,” he says. “I’m forever grateful for her helping me get where I am today.”

Kathy Batson

Sunrise



Kathy Batson, who has a hearing loss, used to think that her disability limited her career options. She shied away from jobs that required speaking on the phone, attending meetings, or

communicating in noisy areas. Then she came to VR and learned that she was capable of much more.

Kathy met with VR Counselor, Lucia Mavrakis, who provided her with hearing aids and job placement services. After working with Job Coach Ana Davis to improve her resume and interviewing skills, Kathy was approached by a recruiter. “I was hesitant at first,” she says. “But they hired me, and I realized I cannot put limitations on what I can accomplish.”

Kathy started as a temp with a company called Core Logic in September 2013 and was hired permanently in February 2014. She is now the executive assistant to the vice president of her division and a billing coordinator.

She says that the company has been very accommodating when it comes to hearing loss, and that she is grateful for the challenging environment her boss has created for her.

“I am very happy at my job because I am in an atmosphere where I am learning and growing daily. It is in a new industry for me and my duties are different from what I had done in the past,” she says. “My wishes for the future are to continue being employed in a company where I am happy and have the potential for growth.”

Kathy was very pleased with her experience with VR. “They assisted me by providing the tools I needed to find and maintain employment, along with having a better social life,” she says. “They made it easy.”

Corey North

Daytona Beach



When Corey North came to VR, he knew exactly where he wanted to work – the Florida Talking Library. “I tried to get him to apply for other jobs because the library didn’t have any job

openings, but he always said “no,”” says his VR counselor, Joyce Barros. “I wasn’t really trying to work at other places,” Corey says with a grin.

“He is persistent and determined, and he waited until a position opened up,” Joyce explains. “He was stubborn, but it really paid off.” Joyce believes that the job pursuit helped Cory gain more confidence. “Every time I saw him, I felt that he was more self-confident. He didn’t seem as forgetful, and he started developing ways to remember better,” she says.

Corey has trouble with his memory because he developed dementia at a young age as a result of complications from brain surgery. The condition affected his mood and mobility, and often left him unable to remember instructions.

So when Corey came to VR in 2008 for help finding a job, he needed to find a place where he would feel comfortable. For Corey, that place was the Florida Talking Library. He’d volunteered there for six years, inspecting the media that arrived in plastic cases. He enjoyed the work so much that he pursued a job at the library even though no positions were open. When a part-time job opened up in 2014, he gratefully began his employment – and he’s been thriving ever since.

Joyce is proud to see Corey succeed at work. “He was so determined,” she says. “He really did it on his own.”

Kevin Durden

Ocala



Kevin Durden has followed the path of many young people. He finished high school, found his first job and moved into his own apartment – all great milestones.

However, this wasn’t always the plan. Kevin has an intellectual disability and originally lived in a group home without many opportunities. But he wanted to work, so he came to VR, and met Counselor Nicole Steltenkamp.

Kevin told Nicole that he had always dreamed of working as a chef in a fancy hotel, so she signed him up for the Hands On Education culinary program through the Hyatt Orlando. Hands On Education is a two-week training program in the hospitality business, and Kevin went through the culinary program to learn the basics of becoming a chef at a large hotel.

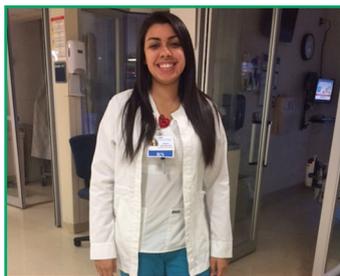
Kevin loved the program, and wanted to work for the Hyatt. Unfortunately, they didn’t have an opening at that time, so Kevin returned to Ocala and began looking for other jobs in the food business.

Kevin was excited when he landed a job in food service at Charley’s Grilled Subs. “Charley’s is a wonderful place to work. We are a team; we work together,” says Kevin.

Kevin still hopes to go to culinary school to earn his degree and become a chef at a fancy hotel, but for now, he’s happy to be working at a job he loves. “Every time I think about my job, I say to myself, ‘look what I accomplished in life.’ It was a great opportunity for me,” he says. “If anyone else wants to do that, VR is a great place to start.”

Cristy Segura

Miami



When Cristy Segura sets her mind to something, she always finds a way to follow through – and it’s that perseverance that has led to her success. “When Cristy has a goal, she won’t give up,” says her

VR counselor, Olga Ramos. “She says she can do it, and she can.”

Cristy, who has emotional and learning disabilities, first came to VR as a college student looking for help achieving her dream of becoming a registered nurse (RN). With VR’s assistance, she earned her Associate of Science degree at Broward Community College in 2013, and moved on to Florida International University to complete her Bachelor of Science in Nursing in 2015.

Cristy is now employed as an RN at Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami Beach. Cristy enjoys providing treatment, but it’s the personal aspect of nursing that she loves the most. “I like the caring part of the job,” she says. “It’s not just caring for the patients, but also for the families that visit. I like that I get to build those relationships.”

Olga isn’t surprised by Cristy’s success in her career. “Working with Cristy was like working with a professional,” she says. “She is on top of everything, and she always has a goal in mind.”

Christy’s next goal is to further her education. She is currently studying for the GRE so she can attend graduate school and earn a Master’s degree.

Olga has no doubt that Cristy will succeed in these future plans. “She has come so far and still has more goals,” says Olga. “She’ll make it happen.”

Mark Carstens

Orange City



Mark Carstens, who has bipolar disorder and a learning disability, came to VR with a dream – he wanted to preserve historic buildings by restoring the integrity and authenticity of their

original construction.

To help him make that dream a reality, Mark’s VR Counselor, Jennilyn Green, provided counseling and mental health support. She also paired him with Job Coach Sandra Wilson. With Sandra’s help, Mark approached a local business owner, Jodi Rubin, to discuss job opportunities at her company, CCS Restorations.

When Sandra first contacted Jodi about the possibility of Mark working for CCS Restoration, she was hesitant. Sandra explained that she had been working with Mark, and she would be there to assist in any way needed. Jodi, Sandra, and Rob Register, the shop manager, finalized the accommodations, and Mark joined CCS Restoration.

Since he began working for CCS Restoration in July 2014, Mark’s whole life has changed, and he continues to thrive at work. Jodi and Rob have only glowing remarks to share about Mark’s work ethic.

Despite their initial doubts, Jodi and Rob are now happy they gave Mark a chance. Mark is an asset to the company and although has much work to do in order to learn and refine his skills, he is well on his way to making his mark in the historic preservation field.

Jodi says, “When Mark came to us he lacked finesse. This is something we have taught him and a skill he has gained. Thank you for bringing him to us.”

Eddie Trujillo

Homestead



Music is a career for Eddie Trujillo, who works as a music director at Buen Samaritano Church in Homestead, but it's more than just a job – it's a way of life. "I've been playing professionally for

12 years, but I've been involved with music for the last 20 years," he says. "I'm always listening to music, even when I'm not at work." So when his spinal muscular atrophy began to threaten his ability to play guitar, Eddie knew he couldn't let his disability interfere with the work he loved. Instead, he reached out to VR for help.

VR provided Eddie with a new wheelchair designed specifically to help him in his job. The power wheelchair allows him to stand while he plays guitar so he can lead the church's congregation in song, and includes an elevating leg lift that lets him access the amp controls with his feet. VR also modified his van to include a lift and ramp, along with an easy lock system to attach the new wheelchair to the van for safe driving.

The van and wheelchair have helped Eddie in his professional life. "They help me get around, and that's important since I'm always traveling as a musician," he says.

In the future, Eddie hopes to continue his career at Buen Samaritano Church, where he has been working since 2002. He believes that his 13 years of employment are proof that people with disabilities can be long term employees.

"I think most employers are worried that a person with a disability won't last long term. They'd be surprised," says Eddie. "You can't underestimate someone just because of their disability."

Judi Page

Tallahassee



In September 2012, Judi Page's life changed overnight. Judi woke up one morning to find that she was completely deaf in her left ear and had only limited hearing in her right ear. When she

visited a doctor, she learned that the cause of the hearing loss was unknown and the damage would be permanent.

Judi came to VR in December 2012 for help accommodating her new disability. With VR's assistance, Judi saw an audiologist and received biCROS hearing aids, a special type of aid made for those with unbalanced hearing loss. The biCROS aid picks up sounds on her left side, where she has no hearing, and transfers them to her right ear, where the hearing loss is much less severe, so Judi can hear everything happening around her.

Judi is grateful for the difference the biCROS aids have made at work and at home. "Everything has improved – my work life and my personal life," says Judi. "It gives you your confidence back."

As much as she enjoys the hearing aids, Judi names something else as the best thing VR did for her – her new alarm clock. Since Judi tends to sleep on her right side, leaving only her left ear exposed, she couldn't hear her alarm clock go off in the mornings.

VR provided a sonic boom alarm clock, which shakes the bed and displays flashing lights to ensure she wakes up. "You can't sleep through that," says Judi.

Judi is happy with the progress she has made and the people who have helped her. "Everyone at VR treated me like royalty," she says. "I would recommend that anyone who needs help give them a call."

Pierre Garnaud

Ft. Lauderdale



Imagine being hidden away and ignored by your parents because you have a disability. Now imagine that not only can you not hear what other people are saying, they are speaking many different

languages. This was Pierre Garnaud's life as a child.

Pierre is deaf and grew up in Haiti. "Sign language is not recognized by Haitians," says Pierre. "Haitians who are deaf may use some oral Creole, some oral French, some American Sign Language, gestures, or a combination of any of these to communicate."

"Many individuals with disabilities are considered to have little value," he continues. "People like me remain in the family home and are often hidden from everyone."

As he grew older, Pierre became determined to create a better life for himself. He developed a language all of his own by combining sign language with oral English, Creole, and French, and taught himself to sew garments in order to work as a tailor. When he realized his career options were limited in Haiti, he moved to the United States for greater employment opportunities.

Once Pierre arrived in the U.S. in 2008, he came to VR for help finding a job. With VR's assistance, Pierre found work as a tailor at Alterations and Much More in Ft. Lauderdale.

Owner Karina Bramer was happy to have Pierre join her staff. "He is a lovely person," says Karina. "His disability is not an issue at my work place."

Pierre is grateful for the chance to work. "Working as a tailor makes me happy," he says. "Having a disability will not stop me from obtaining my purpose in life."

Robert Halliburton

Orlando



Robert Halliburton, who has Cerebral Palsy and uses a wheelchair, lived in an institution for individuals with disabilities, but often found himself wanting more – more freedom,

more choices, and more opportunities.

He got his wish when the Agency for Persons with Disabilities helped him move out of the institution and into the community. He enjoyed his new independence, but he continued to want more. He wanted to go to work, so he came to VR.

His VR Counselor enrolled him in the Discovery Program, which allowed Robert to meet with a coach who helped him determine his interests and identify the barriers that were preventing him from getting a job. VR also provided Robert with new clothes for interviews, a shower chair with the appropriate lift, and other assistance to make it easier for him to prepare for work opportunities.

And finally, at an age when most people are considering retiring, Robert found his first job. He is an office assistant for a marketing company, Perfect Petroleum, where he shreds papers and puts together marketing bags for the customers.

Robert is grateful for the opportunity to work. "It's a wonderful job; I couldn't ask for a better job," he says. "The owner, Aashish Kapadia, is a wonderful man."

Robert's proud that he's now a tax-paying citizen but he says it's not so much the money that's important, "what really matters is your dedication and being able to make a difference."



Vocational
Rehabilitation

For more information, contact:

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(800) 451-4327

TTY users dial 711 to connect with the telecommunications relay service (TRS). Video phone users can call through the video relay service (VRS).

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