- [Lee Ann] Hello, my name is Lee Ann Russo. I work for Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services. You might hear us referred to as IVRS, Voc Rehab, or vocational rehabilitation, but the main goal of Voc Rehab is to help individuals with disabilities find employment.

The mission of Voc Rehab is to work for and with individuals who have disabilities to achieve their employment, independence, and economic goals. We provide expert individualized services to Iowans with disabilities to achieve work. Employment is the ultimate objective for each individual served by IVRS. IVRS is a federally and state funded program, designed to help individuals with disabilities find, retain, regain, and advance in employment. Both IVRS and our sister agency, the Department for the Blind, are voluntary programs. They're not entitlement programs, unlike special education. We have rights and responsibilities that we require for individuals who participate. IVRS works with a variety of community partners, agencies, businesses, disability groups, and other stakeholders. Again, we believe that work is the first and preferred option for all persons with disabilities.

There are 80 vocational rehabilitation agencies nationally, all of which believe in the power of work. IVRS assists eligible individuals with disabilities to become employed, and no one person with a disability is like another. That's why some people with disabilities are eligible for VR, while others are not. Those who receive VR services have a wide range of disabilities. There are over 900 disabling conditions, and again, no one person is alike. VR is a state and federal program, in that we get almost 80% of our funds from the federal government, which is matched by the State of Iowa by over 20%.

The Rehabilitation Services Bureau, or RSB, has 13 area offices and 25 service units across the state. There are VR counselors assigned to every service unit in high school in Iowa. We do assess the significance of a person's disability, so it's always best to refer someone to VR if you have any questions, and let the counselors decide whether or not that person is eligible.

If you're serving a person who has an interest in exploring competitive employment in their community, they should be referred to IVRS. If the person has a guardian, it's helpful to involve that person in a meeting as well. Individuals can be referred to IVRS at any time. We have a referral form, you can pick up the phone, you can email us, or a person can drop by any of our 13 offices. Individuals can complete the application rather than the referral form, or they can simply let VR know that they'd like to receive services. We then schedule a meeting, hopefully within 10 days, to complete our application and intake. Eligibility, again, not entitlement for IVRS is based on the significance of a disability.

In other words, to qualify for IVRS, a person has to have a disability, that disability has to affect some way, the person's ability to become employed, and there must be a need for VR services for that person in order to work. Again, a person can be referred to VR in a variety of ways. It's important to note that there are three categories of disability within the VR system, most significantly disabled, significantly disabled, and otherwise eligible. If a person receives social security benefits, they're automatically eligible to receive VR services. Depending on one of the three categories that the person is in, there may be a waiting list for VR services. Again, not everyone with a disability is going to qualify for IVRS.

Here's a map depicting the 13 area offices for which IVRS offices serve. Again, there are 25 branch offices, one at every college in Iowa, as well as many at community colleges. VR serves all 99 counties. A counselor is assigned to every high school in Iowa. We can meet individuals in the VR office or any public setting, such as a library, a partner's office, or anywhere in a public place. It doesn't have to be at the IVRS office. So, feel free to visit our website and learn more about IVRS. We have some typical services that most individuals receive, one of which is vocational, guidance, or counseling.

The majority of VR staff are trained professional counselors at master's level or above, in some cases, offering counseling and guidance to every individual within the VR system. There are also individuals who participate in skills or academic training. This could be full or part-time, in an academic setting, or anything above high school that leads to a degree or credential.

We also have assistive technology services, so if accommodations may be needed for a job, we call in our AT team to help assess that. Job placement is the ultimate goal for everyone pursuing VR services. It's called competitive integrated employment, and it's the desired outcome for all individuals.

Specialized services might include things like an interpreter or personal assistance, a person might need tools or work equipment, a uniform, or different tools that may be needed to reach their employment goal. We also offer consultation to employers regarding business accommodations. Business is another customer of VR, too. We are tracking services that each VR office and staff provide to area businesses, so that's in conjunction with what you do at workforce services. We do want to collaborate and coordinate our services with you. We don't want to duplicate and we're working together to mainstream and interface within the systems between workforce and IVRS.

Each service that is provided by VR is unique to the individual. There may be a need for transportation training or on the job training. We have over 30 occupational skill training that we might pay a person to participate in. We use our community rehabilitation programs such as the Good Wills or the Easter Seals or any CRP that might be able to offer services to complement an individual's entrance into competitive integrated employment. Our agency also has disability examiners and that's another service that is overseen by Administrator David Mitchell of IVRS. Coordination with workforce and employers, we want to prioritize business engagement to expand access to the trades industry and apprenticeships that are really flourishing within Iowa. We're continuing to explore apprenticeship options with workforce, and workforce staff have been most helpful. We're currently working in Des Moines and Northwest Iowa on various apprenticeships.

The workforce center has been a leader in the country with emphasis on quality apprenticeship programs, so we really want to collaborate with you. You know best and we're really interested in learning and participating in established apprenticeship programs for developing goals that make sense in Iowa. Towards that end we really value our partners. We do a lot of partnering externally within our system because there are so many individuals with disabilities. There are over 22,000 individuals in special education programs in the school setting, so we know that VR who's currently serving about 12,500 individuals with disabilities will need some help. We can't do it alone. We've got a lot of different initiatives going and we really want to work with all partners towards that end goal to allow a person to work. We know it's best for everyone, that person as well as our economy and our state as a whole.

The average time to employment within the VR system is about 38 months and that's because a lot of our individuals are in training programs. They're in post high school settings learning at the universities or colleges of their choice or one of the skilled training programs. Disabilities represent about 11.9 of the population in Iowa but only 9.6 are in the labor force. We know that the unemployment rate for individuals with disabilities needs to really be addressed within our system. So we are wanting to provide guidance on technical assistance and provide a continuum of services based on the individuals level of need.

Now both our agencies are mandated to provide comprehensive services but again not everyone with a disability is going to require the intensive services that are provided within IVRS, so for those of you at workforce who have a question, again feel free to refer a person but know that we might not be able to make that person eligible within our system. That's why your system as well as ours needs to be completely accessible for all individuals with disabilities. If you need expert help, please contact IVRS.

There are certain goals that VR has established with workforce and the other core partners under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, WIOA. The first goal is that we need to maintain a close link to the Future Ready Iowa goals to ensure our workforce is represented and provides a continuum of the most advanced, diverse, skilled and future-ready workers in the nation. We want our employers in Iowa to have access to these workers and provide whatever supports they may need to employ them. The second goal in the unified state plan developed between workforce, VR, and the other core partners are that all Iowa youth are afforded the best educational and career opportunities in the nation. We want Iowans to be provided access to high quality education, training and career opportunities. The third goal is that Iowa is going to improve the structure, accessibility, and administration of workforce delivery systems across the state. Iowa's workforce delivery system it's needing to be aligned so that all programs and services are available in an accessible, seamless and integrated manner.

The administrator of VR was assigned by the governor's office to advance the Future Ready Iowa initiative so we're all working with the sense of urgency within our system and that includes our partners as well as people with disabilities and employers. We all have the same goal and that's to meet and fulfill a need.

We believe at VR that there's a job for everyone regardless of their disability or barriers to employment. It's all about making the right fit and the question remember is no longer whether a person can work but where they'll work so keep that in mind as you plan for the future and use IVRS. Thank you.