

## Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services: A Partnership with Transition

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The mission of the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (ADRS) is “*to enable Alabama’s children and adults with disabilities to achieve their maximum potential.*” ADRS is unique in the nation in that it is comprised of state and federal programs that provide a continuum of services from birth through old age for Alabamians with disabilities. Operationally, ADRS programs function within three divisions: Alabama’s Early Intervention System, Children’s Rehabilitation Service and Vocational Rehabilitation Service.

**Alabama’s Early Intervention System** coordinates services statewide for infants and toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays from birth to age 3, preparing them and their families for the transition to the State Department of Education’s preschool program for 3- to 5-year-olds. Early Intervention provides financial and technical support to the more than 60 community programs that provide direct early intervention services.

**Children’s Rehabilitation Service** provides services to children with special health-care needs from birth to age 21 and their families. This division provides disability services, expertise and adaptive technology to local school systems, assisting teachers and school nurses in the education of children with special health-care needs. This program also administers the statewide Hemophilia Program, which serves Alabama’s children and adults who have this life-threatening blood disorder.

**Vocational Rehabilitation Service (VRS)**, the department’s largest division, has the primary goal of placing individuals with disabilities into stable competitive employment in their home communities. VRS accomplishes this goal by providing rehabilitation, education and employment-related services to nearly 40,000 adolescents and adults with disabilities through long-standing partnerships with local school systems, other state agencies, colleges and universities, junior colleges, vocational technical schools and community rehabilitation programs. The VRS Business Enterprise Program provides qualified blind individuals with job training and employment opportunities through the management and operation of snack bars, vending facilities, gift shops and cafeterias. The State of Alabama Independent Living “SAIL” Service (formerly Homebound) is housed within the VRS division and provides services to Alabamians who have the most significant disabilities resulting from spinal cord or head injuries. SAIL assists these individuals in remaining in their homes and communities rather than in nursing homes or other institutions. VRS also provides disability management and employee placement services to some 5,000 Alabama businesses each year.

One of the largest service programs within the VRS division is the Transition from School to Work program. VRS has a rich history of providing transition services to students with disabilities transitioning from school to work and community and serves as a national leader in this area. VRS

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transition from school to work services help ensure that Alabama's students with disabilities leave school as independent, productive, contributing members of their home communities. In April 1984, Lamona Lucas was appointed director of Rehabilitation Services. One of her early decisions was to embrace and expand the VRS Transition from School to Work Program. Later that same year, Alabama's cooperative interagency transition efforts officially began with the establishment of a state-level Agreement of Cooperation between Vocational Rehabilitation, Special Education and Vocational Education. The following year, the first formal local-level cooperative agreements between VRS and local school systems were developed.

ADRS collects transition data on a number of variables. For several years, ADRS has matched transition data against the annual statewide federal child count data gathered by the State Department of Education to identify all children and youths receiving special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). ADRS, the Department of Education, and Auburn University have analyzed the data each year for demographic, need identification and service-planning purposes. The following information is a sample of current data collected on transition-age youths.

The table below summarizes ADRS's commitment to providing employment services to transition youths for more than a decade. Currently, 35 percent of all consumers served and 35 percent of all consumers placed into employment by ADRS are transition students (students who entered the adult vocational rehabilitation program while in high school). Since 1987, the number of transition students served by ADRS has increased by 52 percent and the number of these students who were ultimately placed into successful employment increased by more than 245 percent. The matching of ADRS data and the state IDEA Child Count data has also shown that ADRS transition counselors serve almost 7,000 students with disabilities each year who are currently enrolled in Alabama's local high schools.

**Successful Rehabilitations Through ADRS**

Year	Transition	All ADRS	Trans %
1987	9,216	39,193	23.51%
1988	10,894	39,718	27.43%
1989	11,087	41,209	26.90%
1990	13,560	42,274	32.08%
1991	13,692	42,991	31.85%
1992	13,372	41,199	32.46%
1993	13,096	40,078	32.68%
1994	12,775	38,097	33.53%
1995	13,020	38,366	33.94%
1996	13,397	38,007	35.25%
1997	13,952	39,150	35.64%
1998	14,412	39,621	36.37%
1999	13,976	39,784	35.13%

Year	Transition	All ADRS	Trans %
1987	758	6,215	12.20%
1988	1,056	6,038	17.49%
1989	1,234	6,059	20.37%
1990	1,505	6,188	24.32%
1991	1,630	6,433	25.34%
1992	1,687	6,213	27.15%
1993	1,895	6,701	28.28%
1994	2,039	6,914	29.49%
1995	2,089	7,070	29.55%
1996	2,245	7,157	31.37%
1997	2,311	7,252	31.87%
1998	2,478	7,471	33.17%
1999	2,620	7,572	34.60%

ADRS provides several vocational rehabilitation services to transition students beginning sometimes as early as the ninth grade and provides specific job placement services to transition students in their exiting year of school. An ADRS rehabilitation counselor is assigned to every high school in the state and a liaison counselor is assigned to every postsecondary institution. Currently ADRS has more than 75 specialty counselors with transition caseloads.

In the early 1990's, ADRS began receiving Jobs Training Partnership Act Eight Percent program funds from the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs and the State Department of Education to serve students with disabilities. ADRS used these funds to begin placing job coaches/job resource specialists in local school systems as a way to improve the employment outcomes of students with disabilities exiting the school systems. The success of this program brought about a substantial change in the way ADRS provided cooperative transition services. ADRS soon began to allocate vocational rehabilitation funds to expanding the number of job coaches assigned to local school systems. As the employment outcomes increased, the requests for job coaches also increased. The job coach model was in such demand by additional local school systems that the potential funding required was greater than the available combined JTPA Eight Percent and ADRS resources.

To address this and other transition needs, in 1995, ADRS began planning with the State Department of Education Division of Special Education Services and Auburn University Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education to determine best practices for students transitioning from school to work and community. In part, this planning was done in preparation for Alabama's application for the Alabama Transition Initiative (ATI) state system change grant and also the development of the Alabama Occupational Diploma (AOD) option for students with disabilities. ADRS made a commitment to cooperatively support funding needed for job coaches to assist AOD candidates in obtaining the 540 hours of paid competitive employment required in their senior/exiting year. However, the number of job coaches required during school year 1999-2000 – when the AOD option was to be available in all local school systems in Alabama – was beyond the funds available through the JTPA Eight-Percent and ADRS programs. In order to meet this greatly expanding need, the decision was made to have ADRS and local school systems share funding. This decision was in keeping with the shared transition responsibility of ADRS and local school systems and resulted in the leveraging of ADRS funds to allow immediate expansion of the job coach model. This joint-funding model decision has proven to be even more critical during the last year, when the Job Training Partnership Act and its Eight Percent funding ended.

The number of job coaches, and the amount of ADRS funds committed, has continued to increase each year. Currently ADRS jointly funds 79 job coaches with 70 local school systems across the state. During the 2000-2001 school year, this program has grown to a \$2.5 million joint initiative, with ADRS providing \$1.3 million of funding and the 70 local school systems providing \$1.2 million. ADRS local field staff and the local school system staff cooperatively hire and manage the jointly funded job coaches.

While cooperative interagency transition service in Alabama has made tremendous strides and is truly a model for the nation, the need for critical improvements remains. The AOD is designed primarily for students with mild to moderate disabilities and while most of the basic components of

the AOD are appropriate for students who have more significant disabilities, these students face many additional barriers to employment that require a more intensive service model than the AOD program is designed to provide. In addition to needing the community-based components of the AOD, students with more severe disabilities need support services and a support system to assist them in transitioning to post-school community life. These students typically have multiple barriers to employment that include, but are not limited to, cognitive deficits, physical mobility limitations, personal assistance and care needs, lack of appropriate community transportation options, lack of appropriate assistive technology services and devices, lack of availability of adult community support services, low self- and family expectations for employment, and environmental and attitudinal barriers within the community.

In FY 2000, ADRS increased efforts to develop new transition partnerships, programs and service models to meet the needs of students with more significant disabilities and barriers to employment and community living. Some of these new partnerships and initiatives included:

- Development of a model transition program for students with autism in conjunction with the Lauderdale County Schools, the Department of Education, and the Autism Society of Alabama.
- Collaboration with the Autism Society of Alabama and the Department of Education in the development and implementation of the Family Focus Positive Behavior Support Model, which provides intensive training and support for teams of individuals caring for and working with students with autism.
- Development of a model transition program for students who are deaf and/or blind and have other disabilities in conjunction with the Helen Keller School of the Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind.
- Development of a statewide School-to-Career Student/Parent Network in collaboration with the Alabama School-to-Career Office of the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs and Auburn University.
- Implementation of the Alabama Governor's Youth Leadership Forum in collaboration with the Troy State University Institute for Leadership Development, the Alabama Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities and the Alabama School-to-Career Office of the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs.

The Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services remains committed to ensuring Alabama's students with disabilities leave school as independent, productive and contributing members of their home communities. ADRS is also committed to improving and expanding our interagency transition partnerships with local school systems, other state agencies, colleges and universities, junior colleges, vocational technical schools and community rehabilitation programs. ADRS believes it just makes sense to help place students into employment before they leave school. It's a win-win situation, with everyone benefiting. First and most importantly, students and their families win when students leave school already employed in good jobs in their home communities; second, ADRS and local school systems win when we are able to share and stretch services and resources in accom-

plishing our overall mission of assisting students in making the successful transition from school to work and community; and finally, the state of Alabama and local communities win when students exit school as participating and contributing citizens.