



**Georgia Vocational
Rehabilitation Agency**

ANNUAL REPORT

STATE FISCAL YEAR 2023

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State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Members

Our Mission and Programs

The mission of the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency is to serve Georgians with disabilities to empower them to live independently. Primarily, GVRA accomplishes this by providing services through five (5) integrated and interdependent statutory programs.

- ★ **Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)** program offers an array of services to Georgians who have a disability and want to work or who need services to keep the job they have. Services range from providing a hearing aid to training in assistive technology to offering support with employment or post-secondary education.
- ★ **Roosevelt Warm Springs (RWS) and Cave Spring Center (CSC)** serve Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) clients, 18 years old and older, who are referred by their VR counselors. Clients participate in education and training programs in a residential, holistic, college-like environment with individual attention and customized enrichment.
- ★ **Disability Adjudication Services (DAS)** works with the Social Security Administration (SSA) to make disability determinations for Georgia citizens who apply for entitlement programs administered by the SSA, including Disability Insurance (SSDI) for workers who pay FICA taxes and Supplemental Security Income (SSI), a disability-needs program.
- ★ **Business Enterprise Program (BEP)** gives priority to blind vendors who want to operate food service facilities in federal and state government buildings. It helps visually impaired Georgians become independent business owners in the food service industry.
- ★ **Georgia Industries for the Blind (GIB)** manufactures file folders, safety vests, pillows, and individually wrapped 3-ply face masks. Employees also coordinate customized screen printing, sewing projects, and kitting for corporations at plants in Bainbridge, GA and Griffin, GA. In addition, GIB operates a service site at Robins Air Force Base in Warner Robins, GA.

Letters from Our Leaders

Executive Director, **Chris Wells**



On behalf of the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Services Board, the State Rehabilitation Council, and the more than 800 employees of the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA), I am pleased to

present the agency's 2023 annual report.

GVRA's core mission is to empower individuals with disabilities to live independent lives. It is a mission to which we are committed and are driven to fulfill every day through strong partnerships and the extraordinary efforts of our dedicated employees.

While reviewing this report, you will learn about the impactful work GVRA performs across the state, from providing counseling and job training

skills that lead to employment for graduates of the Roosevelt Warm Springs Comprehensive Rehabilitation Center and Cave Spring Center, implementing retention measures such as pay enhancements for our more than 100 counselors, achieving the highest accuracy rate in the region for disability claims filed by those seeking assistance, and much more.

We are excited to share these accomplishments; however, we also understand there is more work to do in the months and years ahead. Our goal is to provide quality services to Georgians with disabilities and to foster an inclusive culture that contributes to their success in the workplace and in their communities.

Chris Wells

Executive Director

Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency

GVRS Board Chairman, **Thomas Wilson**



It has been an honor to serve as chairman of the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Services Board during the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency's time of growth and substantive change.

Among the most notable accomplishments in FY 2023 are improvements made at the storied Roosevelt Warm Springs Comprehensive Rehabilitation Center. Positive changes at the campus began with a staff reorganization, followed by a \$7.8 million investment in building renovations. On behalf of the GVRS board, I thank Governor Brian P. Kemp and the General Assembly for approving that expenditure as part of the State's annual budget.

At GVRA, clients thrive because of partnerships with government agencies, non-profits, advocacy groups, and the business sector.

For instance, GVRA took steps to help individuals with traumatic brain injuries regain their independence. That initiative is made possible through a research agreement with the Shepherd Center, a renowned facility in Atlanta, GA that treats patients with brain, spinal cord, and other neuromuscular conditions.

Finally, I have the pleasure of serving alongside dedicated Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Services Board members who are committed to improving the lives of people with disabilities so they may secure meaningful employment and live independently. As board chairman, I am inspired by their commitment to serving Georgians in every corner of our state.

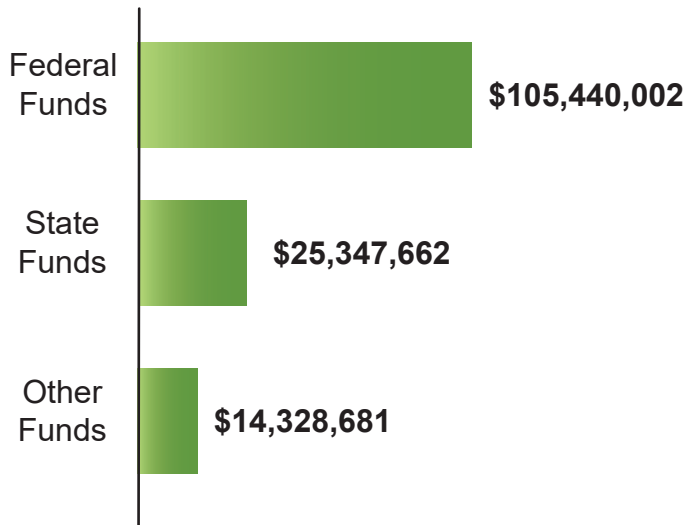
On behalf of the board, I want to thank Executive Director Chris Wells, his senior leadership team, and GVRA employees for their hard work. We look forward to continued success in the future.

Thomas W. Wilson

GVRS Board Chairman

GVRA by the Numbers

FY 2023 Funding by Fund Type

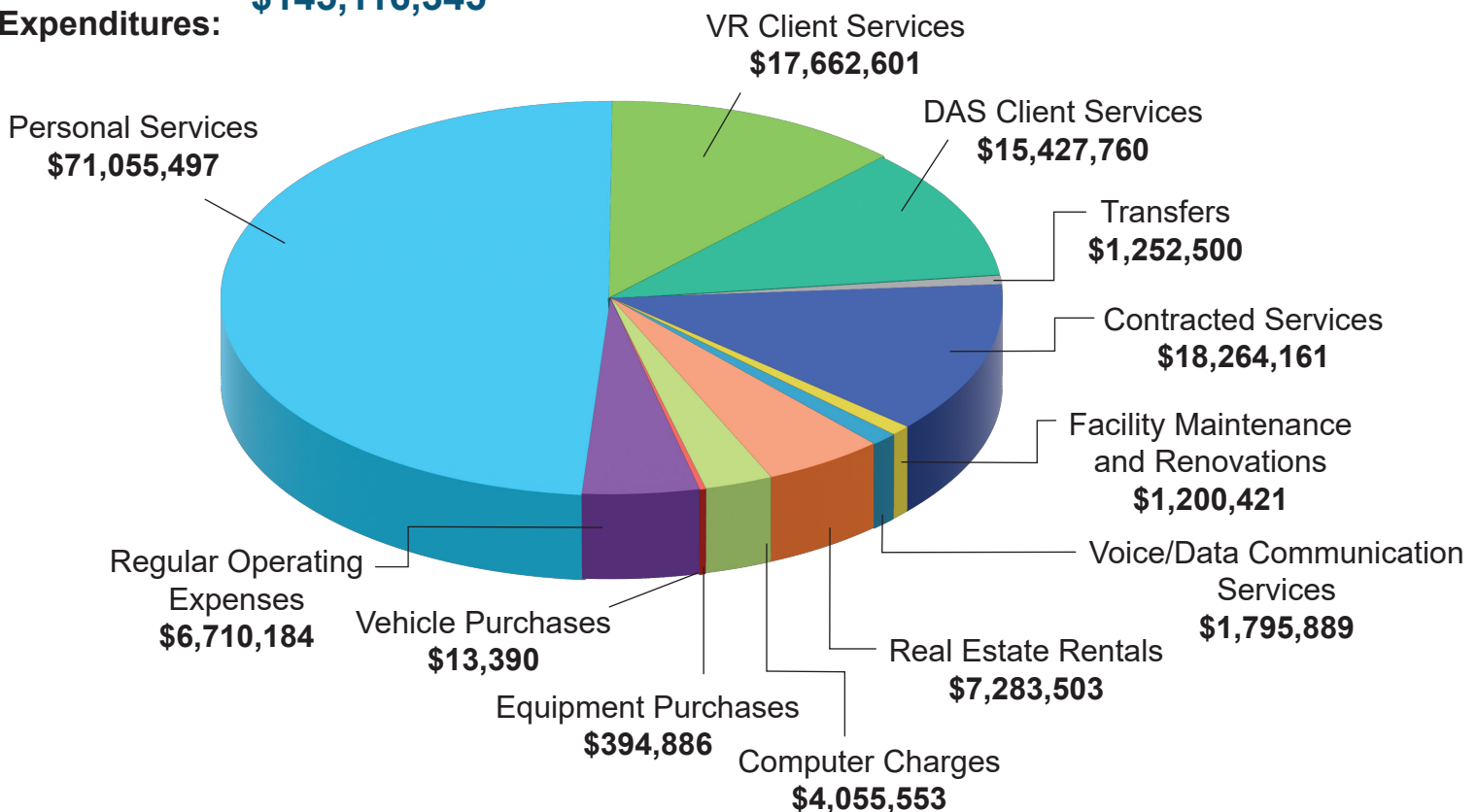


Budget Highlights

- ★ \$7.8 million in General Obligation Bonds to address the most critical repairs on the historic Roosevelt Warm Springs campus.
- ★ \$3.5 million for the Disability Innovation Fund (DIF) Program grant to assist individuals in moving away from the 14 (c) program.
- ★ Disability Adjudication Services program provided over \$15.4 million in services for more than 90,000 claims adjudicated in State Fiscal Year 2023.

FY 2023 Expenditures by Object Class

Total FY 2023 Expenditures: \$145,116,345



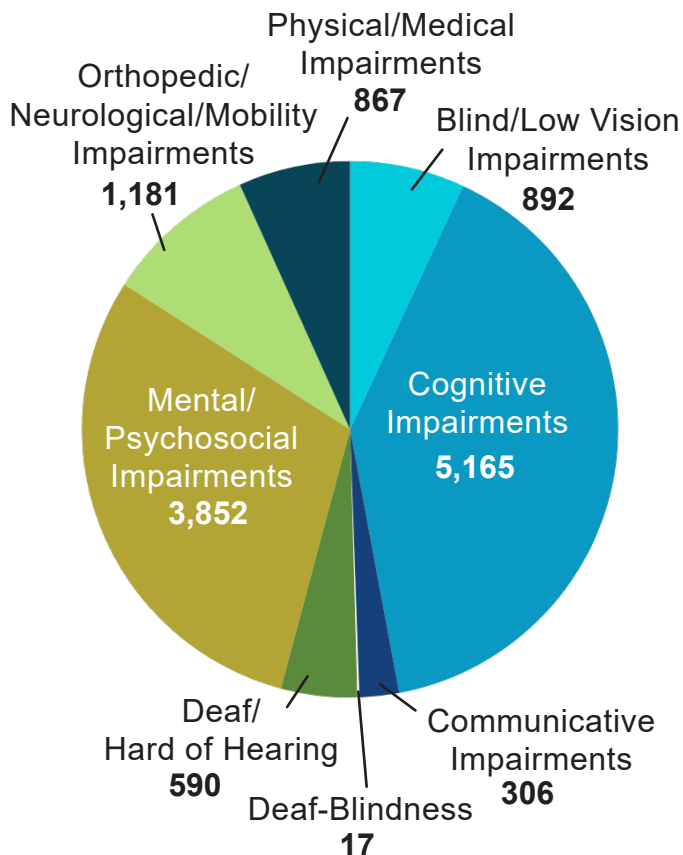
GVRA by the Numbers

Counselor Salaries for FY 2022 and FY 2023

Position	FY 2019 Median Salary	FY 2023 Median Salary	Current Salary Structure
Counselor 1	\$27,206	\$45,873	\$47,063 - \$49,316
Counselor 2	\$32,597	\$50,063	\$49,316 - \$52,000
Counselor 3	\$40,144	\$51,190	\$54,000 - \$57,000
Total	\$40,305	\$48,013	

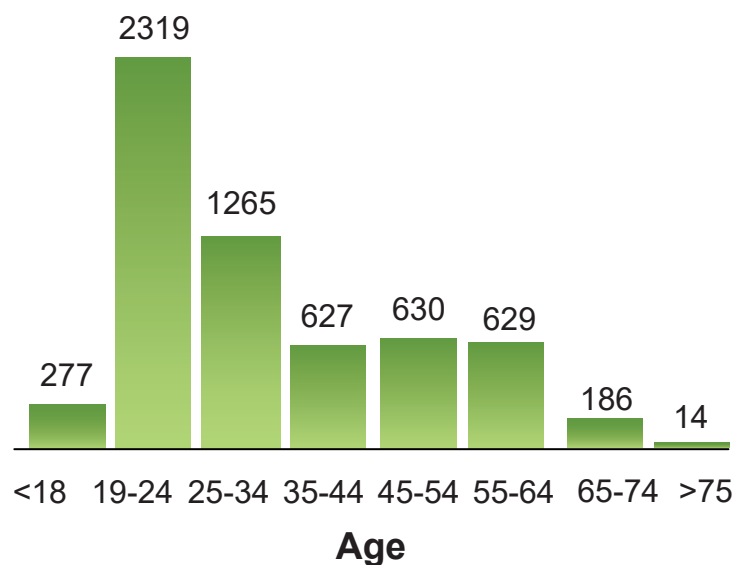
- ★ The Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor entry salary was increased by 10% in FY 2023 as an agency strategy to recruit new counselors and improve the retention rate of current employees. The current salary structure also includes a 5% increase to reflect the cost-of-living adjustment.
- ★ GVRA's turnover rate declined from 13% in FY 2022 to 3% in FY 2023, following the improvement in counselors' pay. The turnover rate in FY 2021 was 16%.

VR Cases by Disability



VR Cases by Age (at Closure)

GVRA's Vocational Rehabilitation program provided over \$17.6 million in services to the over 28,000 clients served during Fiscal Year 2023.

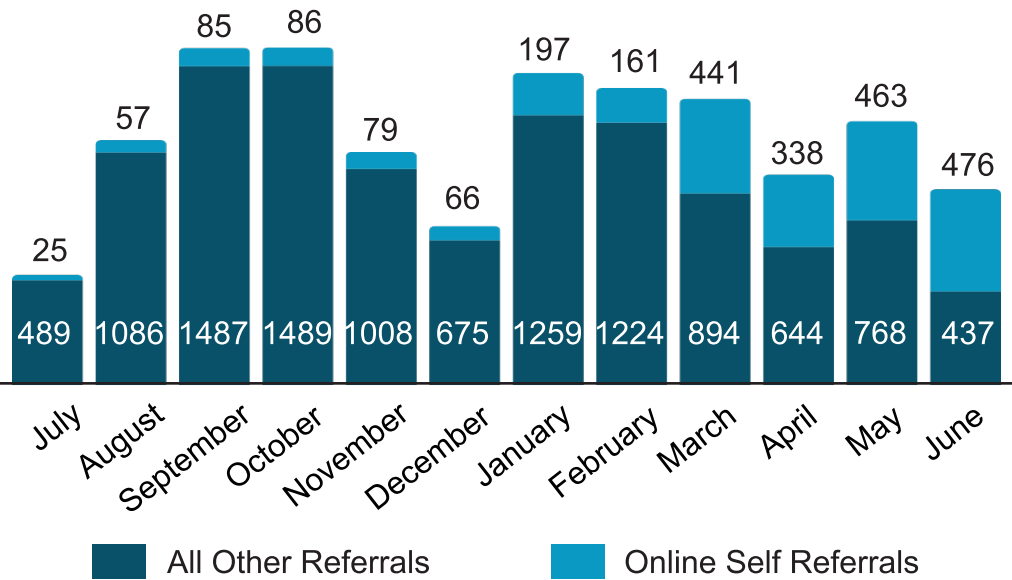


Vocational Rehabilitation Services

Using Technology to Improve Service to Prospective Clients

GVRA officially launched an online referral portal in FY 2023, providing an automated option for individuals with disabilities to apply for services through the agency’s vocational rehabilitation services program.

The new online portal provides a quicker and easier process for anyone with a permanent disability who wants to work or who needs services. Using the online link, prospective clients can complete a referral form and upload the required documents without having to go into an office. Individuals receive a referral number that allows staff and prospective clients to quickly locate a referral through GVRA’s new customer call center. The link is available on the agency’s website.



Partnering for Clients’ Successful Return to the Workplace

In Fiscal Year 2023, GVRA announced a research partnership with the Shepherd Center to improve the vocational outcomes of individuals with moderate to severe brain injuries. During the research study, several Shepherd Center patients received vocational rehabilitation services through GVRA while at the treatment facility, reinforcing the importance of coordinated services for VR clients.

Under guidelines in the study, vocational services are coordinated between Shepherd Center professionals and state GVRA programs, as some GVRA clients receive on-site, on-the-job-training wherever they live in Georgia. The goal is to provide specific guidance to clients regarding the most effective interventions that will compensate for brain injury impairments. Vocational counselors, rehabilitation counselors, rehabilitation physicians, psychologists, and rehabilitation therapists act in tandem to complete patient evaluations. Once discharged from the world-class facility, clients continue to work with GVRA until they gain employment.

The primary benefit of the study is to improve the employment outcomes of individuals with a traumatic brain injury. The study concludes in 2027.





“Thanks to the assistance I received from AgrAbility and GVRA, I’ve made my farming dreams come true.”

Iteago Felton
Georgia Farmer

Making a Veteran’s Dreams Come True

When Army Command Sergeant Major Iteago Felton was stationed at Fort Gordon, he began thinking about how his post-military life would look. Having been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other physical ailments related to his service, he decided he wanted to become self-employed after serving 32 years in the Army.

Toward the end of his enlistment, Felton purchased 25 acres of land in Lincolnton, GA with the goal of becoming a livestock farmer. He contacted the AgrAbility program, a unit of the Institute on Human Development and Disability at the University of Georgia. Since 2005, the program has provided assistive technology coordination and implementation to agricultural workers with disabilities.

“The folks at AgrAbility linked me up with GVRA’s Assistive Work Technology (AWT) Services,” said Felton. “GVRA performed a

worksite assessment and determined what equipment modifications I would need to be successful.”

Mark Ficocelli, an AWT Rehabilitation Technologist in the Augusta office, was instrumental in helping Felton. “Mark was hands-on when it came to equipment modifications and helping me streamline operations,” Felton said. “He checks in frequently to ensure worksite modifications are functioning properly and always asks if there’s anything else GVRA can do to enhance my success.” Felton currently raises hogs, goats, turkeys, chickens, guinea hens, and rabbits. “At 64, I don’t let my physical limitations hold me back,” Felton says. “I tell young people if you’re interested in farming, don’t talk yourself out of it. Thanks to the assistance I received from AgrAbility and GVRA, I’ve made my farming dreams come true,” he stated.

Roosevelt Warm Springs/Cave Spring



Roosevelt Warm Springs Comprehensive Vocational Rehabilitation Center Student Dormitory

- ★ The GVRS Board approved a request to Georgia State Financing and Investment Commission to undertake to issue \$7,810,000 in State of Georgia General Obligation Bonds for renovations at RWS.
- ★ The additional state funds represent a major investment in the campus and underscore GVRA's commitment to attracting more students who are seeking opportunities to gain new skills and enter the workforce.

Entering with No Expectations. Leaving with Hope.

Gwinnett County student Anney Kim walked onto the campus of the Roosevelt Warm Springs Comprehensive Center with no real sense of what to expect. She left with skills, confidence, lifelong friendships, and a job she loves. "My time at Roosevelt Warm Springs has given me

hope," Kim said. "There was so much I liked about my experience — the academics, the counseling, and the friends I made along the way." In her nine months on campus, Kim enjoyed attending chapel services and participating in academic courses such as customer service training and business information technology. "I also learned independent living skills while at RWS, and I am confident those skills will help me," the Mill Creek

High School graduate said. Because she enjoyed her office technology classes best, Kim secured employment as an administrative assistant for a construction company. In fact, she accepted her job offer

before graduation. "I loved my experience at RWS, and I especially liked my instructors. I want to thank everyone at Roosevelt Warm Springs for providing me with hope and so many wonderful opportunities."



Anney Kim, RWS Graduate

Roosevelt Warm Springs/Cave Spring

Paving the Way for Student Success

The Roosevelt Warm Springs Comprehensive Rehabilitation Center (RWS) introduced six new Career Technical Instruction (CTI) pathways in 2023, following a reorganization that brought new leadership to the thriving campus. The pathways are all industry-recognized and conclude with graduates receiving certificates in their chosen area of study – Logistics, Low Voltage Wiring, Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), Hospitality, CVS Retail, and Auto Detail – following the completion of a 16-week program.

Additionally, RWS now operates under a semester system as required by the FY 2015 budget recommendations. This aligns GVRA services with schools, colleges and universities, and other vocational services. As part of the RWS

and Cave Spring programs, students live in a college-like environment and have an opportunity to participate in on-the-job training, to receive classroom instruction, and to earn a paycheck. New cohorts of students arrive from across the state in August and January, respectively.

In addition to new academic and training programs, RWS hired veteran educator Dennis “Chip” Medders to lead the RWS campus in Warm Springs, GA and Cave Spring Center in Rome, GA. Upon his arrival, Medders immediately initiated a comprehensive review and restructuring of academic and training programs aimed at improving skills and opportunities for employment for all students.



RWS Graduates



Low Voltage Wiring Instruction



Logistics Instruction



Certified Nursing Assistant Instruction

Blind/Low Vision Programs

Serving the Blind/Low Vision Community

It was a year of transition for GVRA, as the agency redesigned its Vocational Rehabilitation program to respond to the unique needs of Georgians with disabilities across the state. Beginning in spring 2022, GVRA created specialty counselor positions to better serve potential clients who are Blind/Low Vision (B/LV) and Deaf/Hard of Hearing (D/HoH), reinforcing the agency's commitment to serve more individuals with disabilities.

Today, all GVRA districts have a counselor with a focus or training in serving Blind/Low Vision clients, who each report to a B/LV supervisor and who are supported by a statewide coordinator for B/LV. To ensure that services are coordinated, the B/LV counselors work in conjunction with D/HoH counselors to meet the needs of deaf-blind clients.

Additionally, GVRA recognizes the need to be an integral part of a blind youth's transition planning. To that end, the agency has placed a dedicated counselor at the Georgia Academy for the Blind (GAB) to ensure that each student becomes a Vocational Rehabilitation client, positioning them to receive quality services before graduation.

In addition to counselors, GVRA has Assistive Work Technology (AWT) staff who work closely with B/LV counselors on cases and provide iOS training for B/LV individuals at Centers for Independent Living throughout the state. This coordinated approach to serving B/LV clients promotes collaboration and information-sharing, contributing to successful outcomes for clients.



Client Services



Omega Paper Sheeter at GIB

Making Adjustments to Overcome Challenges

Not unlike most industries throughout Georgia, the COVID-19 pandemic forced state agencies to pivot and to identify new ways to conduct business through an unprecedented health crisis. That was the case for the Georgia Industries for the Blind (GIB), which adjusted its operations to overcome challenges created by major supply-chain demands for paperboard, a product used to produce classification folders at the Bainbridge, GA facility.

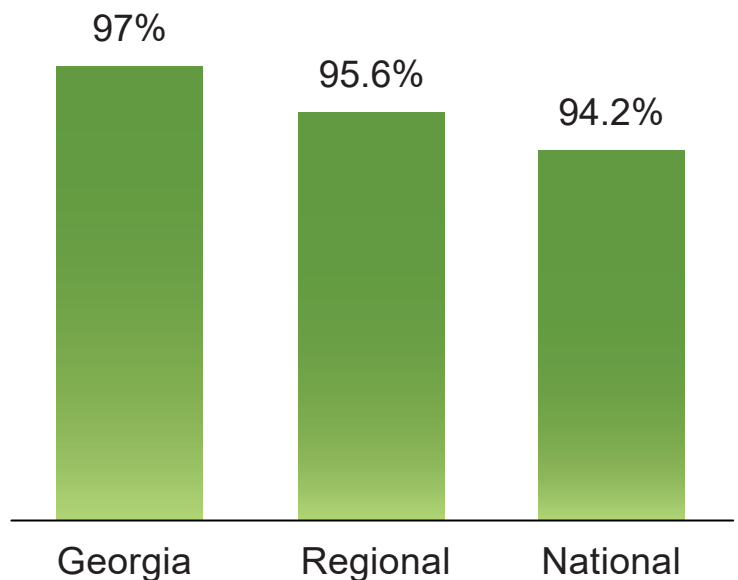
In FY 2023, using \$251,800 in state funds, GIB's leadership purchased an Omega paper sheeter for its production facility, with the goal of reducing the reliance on paperboard suppliers. Additionally, GVRA was awarded a \$40,000 grant from the National Industries for the Blind (NIB) and plans to use the additional dollars in FY 2024 to offset the cost of the sheeter. The sheeter, which can be operated by those with limited vision, allows employees to produce 200 cut sheets per minute, at a fraction of the cost charged by suppliers. The purchase allowed GIB staff to streamline operations, increase revenues, and hire 14 more assemblers. The additional employees will help ramp up production and eventually eliminate backorders for the classification folders.

Disability Adjudication Services

The Disability Adjudication Services (DAS) program operates under an agreement with the Social Security Administration (SSA) to make disability determinations for Georgia citizens who apply for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) – entitlement programs administered by the SSA. Managed by the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA), the program is fully federally-funded and has a FY2023 budget of \$70.3 million.

- ★ The program ended FY23 with an initial claim determination accuracy rating of 97%, higher than the national average. The national average accuracy rating is 94.2%.
- ★ DAS cleared 91,085 cases in FY23 alone by increasing the number of claims cleared per examiner.
- ★ DAS has a dedicated phone line, 678-639-2100, for clients to call and check the status of their applications. SSA's customer line can be reached at 1-800-772-1213.

DAS Initial Case Determination Accuracy State FY 2023



Honoring DAS Employee for Exceeding Expectations



Jason Turner, a supervisor in GVRA's Disability Adjudication Services (DAS) program, earned the Social Security Administration's Associate Commissioner's Honor from the Atlanta Region, joining other employees from across the nation who were recognized for their outstanding performance.

Turner was acknowledged for going above and beyond in his job as an Adjudicator 3 in assisting his colleagues, including training eight new adjudicators, and conducting at least 45 one-hour group training sessions for the new adjudicators and others. He also provided caseload management assistance to at least four of the more experienced adjudicators assigned to him from other adjudicative units. Turner's dedication to the agency's mission and his willingness to help others resulted in better customer service and increased weekly determinations.

Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Services (GVRS) Board Members

Thomas W. Wilson, *Chair*

Faye Perdue, *Vice Chair*

Sandy Adams, *Secretary*

Craig Camuso

Suzanne Dooley

Louise Hill

Vincent Martin

Jane McCall

Johnathan Taylor

Jimmy Defoor, *Chair Emeritus*

State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Members

Juliet Hardeman, *Chair*

Karen Addams

Matthew Barnes

Jerry Haywood

Katie Hearn

Deborah Hibben

Myndi Kuhlmann

Lisa Leiter

Wina Low

Michele Mason

Cherise Mlott

Joy Norman

Jennifer Page

Aarti Sahgal

Peggy Venable

Col. Dr. Samuel Verniero, Jr.

GVRA



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