



GEORGIA VOCATIONAL  
REHABILITATION AGENCY

# ANNUAL REPORT

STATE FISCAL  
YEAR 2024

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# OUR MISSION

The mission of the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA) 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 Counselor

## OUR 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 educational 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 Federal Insurance Contributions Act 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.

## MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CHRIS WELLS



On behalf of the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Services (GVRS) Board, the State Rehabilitation Council, and the more than 700 dedicated employees of the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA), I am pleased to present our 2024 Annual Report. At GVRA, our core mission is to empower individuals with disabilities to lead independent, fulfilling lives. This mission is the foundation of everything we do. Through strong partnerships and the dedication of our staff, we remain committed to making continuous progress and creating more opportunities for those we serve. In this report, you'll find highlights of GVRA's impactful work across Georgia.

From expanding our outreach campaigns that raise awareness about the comprehensive services we provide, to launching an online referral portal that streamlines access to vocational rehabilitation services, GVRA is constantly innovating to better serve our communities. We are especially proud of achieving the highest employment rate in our region for individuals with disabilities who have secured employment after completing our vocational rehabilitation programs. We also celebrate the record number of services we provided to individuals between 14-21 years old. These are just a few examples of the meaningful impact we've made, but our work doesn't stop here.

Thank you for your continued support as we work together to make a meaningful difference in the lives of individuals with disabilities throughout Georgia.

**Chris Wells**  
Executive Director

## MESSAGE FROM GVRS BOARD CHAIRMAN THOMAS WILSON



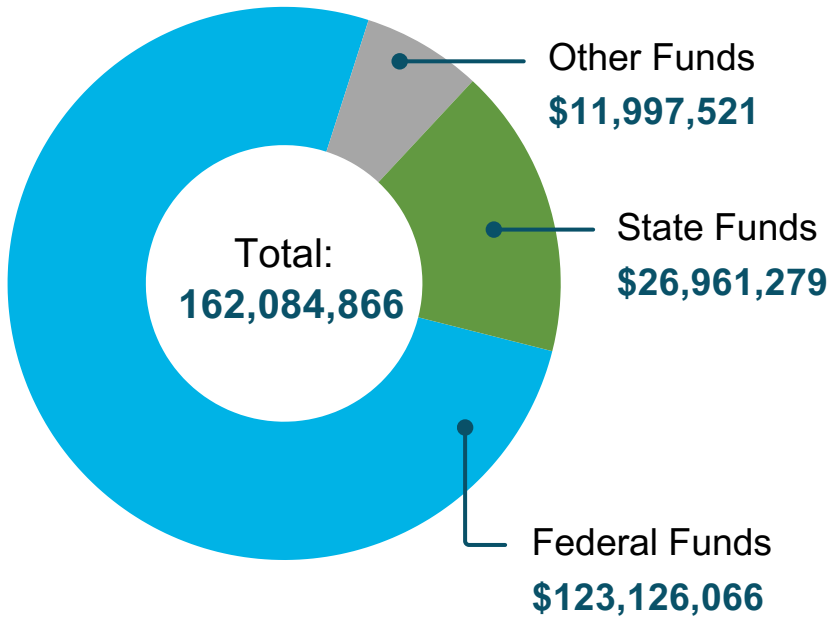
It has been an honor to serve as Chairman of the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Service Board during the significant growth and transformation of the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA). In FY 2024, GVRA reached several key milestones, with one of the most impactful being the launch of the Bud McCall Post-Secondary Vocational Rehabilitation Grant. This grant provides up to \$17,725 annually for tuition, housing, and books. Implementing the Bud McCall Grant allows many Georgians with disabilities the opportunity to pursue higher education, realize their career ambitions, and ultimately improve their futures in meaningful ways.

I am honored to serve alongside a dedicated group of Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Services Board members, each of whom shares an unwavering commitment to improving the lives of individuals with disabilities. Together, we work to help those individuals secure meaningful employment and achieve greater independence. As Chairman, I am continually inspired by our board members' passion and dedication to serving Georgians across the state.

On behalf of the GVRS Board, I express my sincere appreciation to Executive Director Chris Wells, his leadership team, and all GVRA employees for their tireless work and steadfast commitment. We look forward to continued success and the ongoing positive impact that GVRA will have on the lives of Georgians with disabilities in the years ahead.

**Thomas Wilson**  
GVRS Board Chairman

# FY 2024 FUNDING



# 100%

## PRODUCT REVENUE

GIB is fully funded through the sale of products

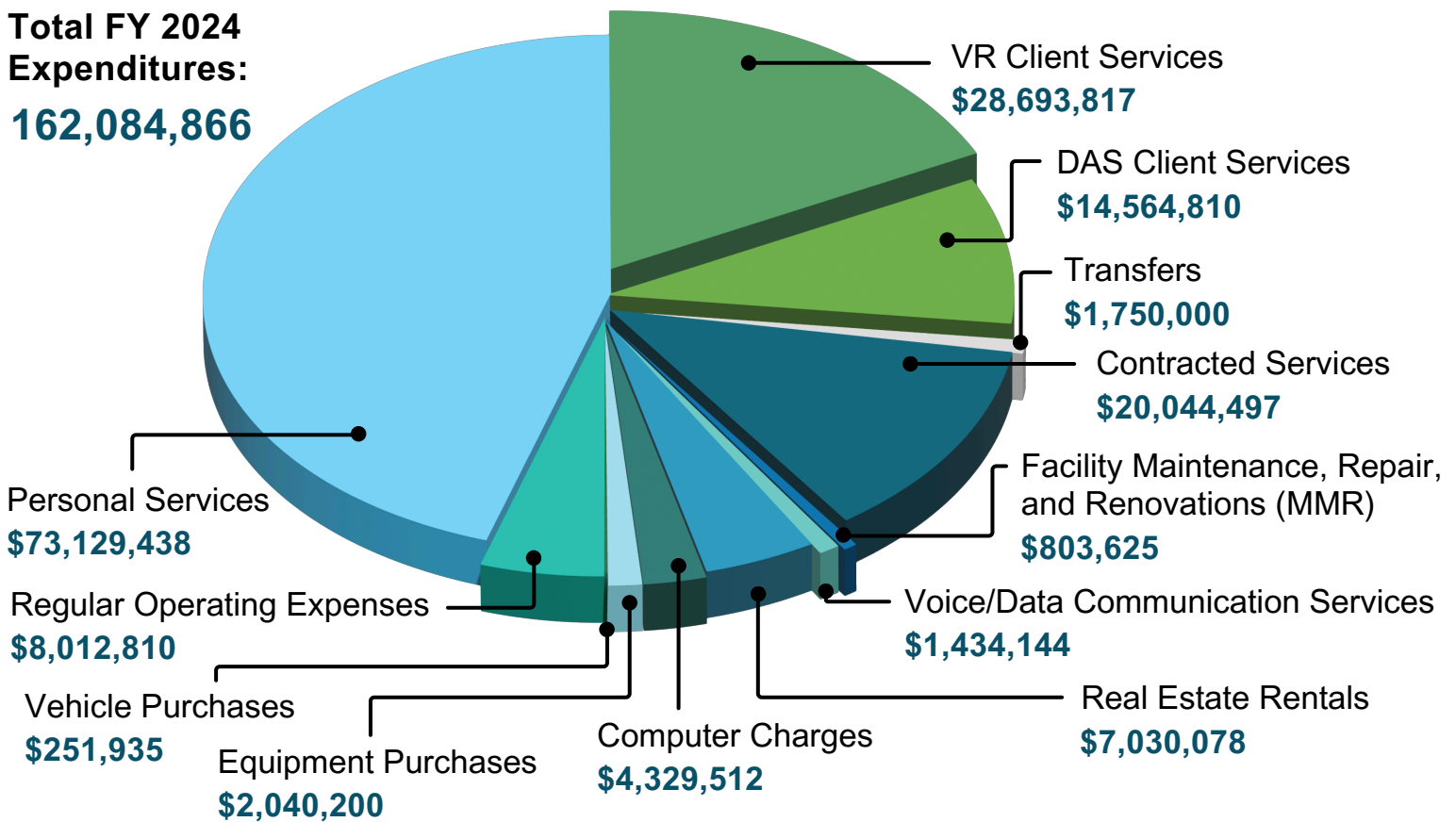
# \$1 → \$3.69

## SECTION 110 GRANT MATCH

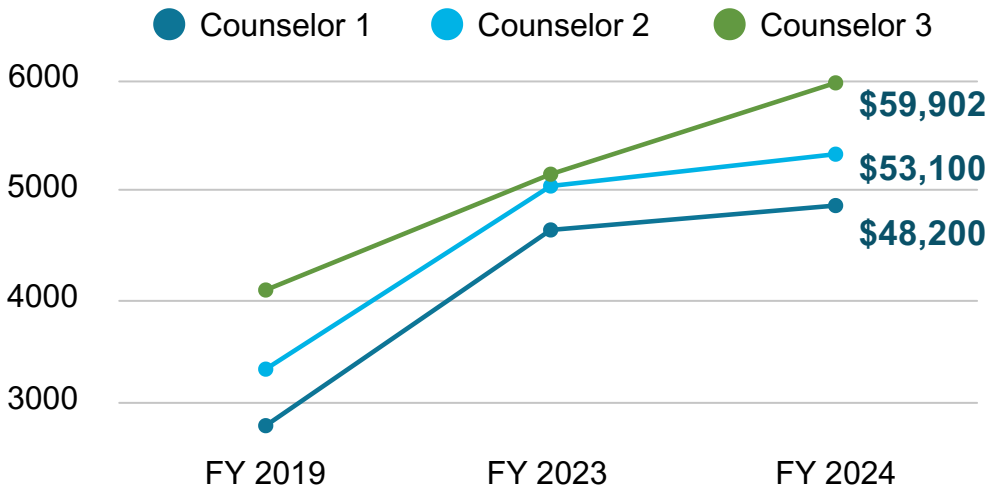
Vocational Rehabilitation Grant Section 110 generates \$3.69 for every eligible non-federal dollar spent

# FY 2024 EXPENDITURES BY OBJECT CLASS

Total FY 2024 Expenditures: 162,084,866



# MEDIAN COUNSELOR SALARIES



**30% → 22%**

## GVRA TURNOVER RATE

GVRA's employee turnover rate has decreased from 30% in FY 2023 to 22% in FY 2024 as the agency recruited new counselors and employees to improve service delivery to clients

# HIRING EVENTS

GVRA continues to prioritize recruitment and retention efforts by hosting hiring events and collaborating with other agencies and organizations at career fairs across the state. GVRA recruiters participated in at least 10 events throughout FY 2024, where they greeted, screened, and often interviewed candidates on-site. This approach enabled staff to assess a large pool of candidates at one time and expedite the recruitment process. For example, during a hiring event for Disability Adjudication Services (DAS) in July 2023, human resources staff successfully filled 21 adjudicator positions. Additional events in October 2023 led to the hiring of 13 positions, while an event in April 2024 resulted in 25 adjudicator positions being filled.

Beyond filling critical positions, GVRA recognizes that participation in career fairs and other hiring events offers valuable opportunities to increase brand visibility and demonstrate our commitment to engaging with local communities.

Event Date	Event Name
July 2023	Disability Adjudication Services (DAS) Hiring Event
October 2023	Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Hiring Event
November 2023	Atlanta Metro Career Fair
February 2024	State Agency Career Fair
February 2024	Biometric Screening Event
February 2024	Panthers on Peachtree
March 2024	2024 Job and Graduate School Fair
March 2024	Government Agency Week and Career Fair
April 2024	State Agency Career Fair
April 2024	Disability Adjudication Services (DAS) Hiring Event

# VR CLIENT OUTCOMES



**14,492** clients received vocational rehabilitation services



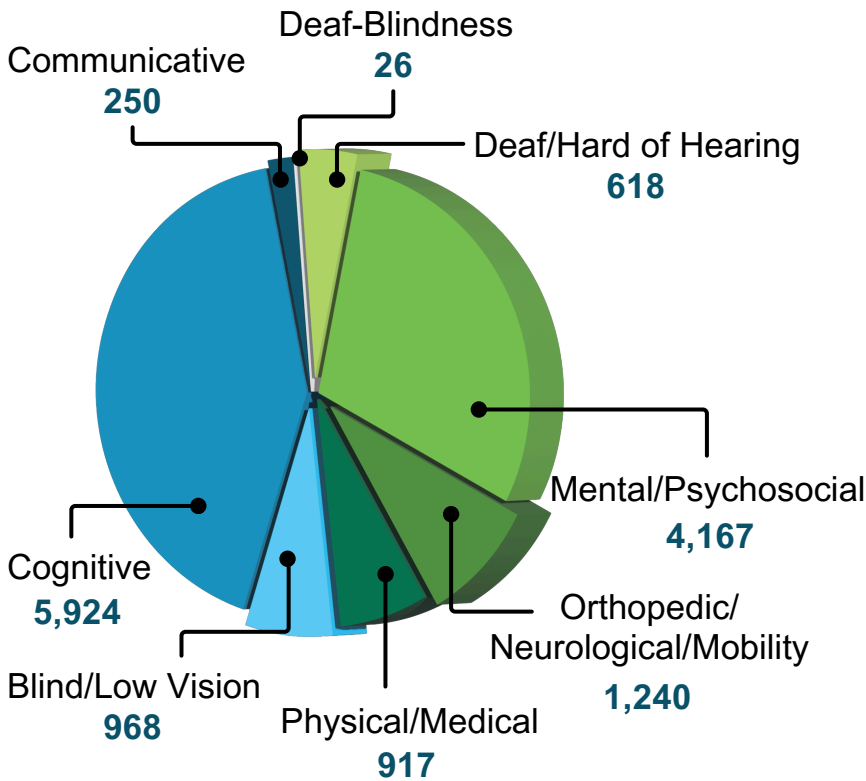
**726** average days from application to case closure

**78%** successful employment rate

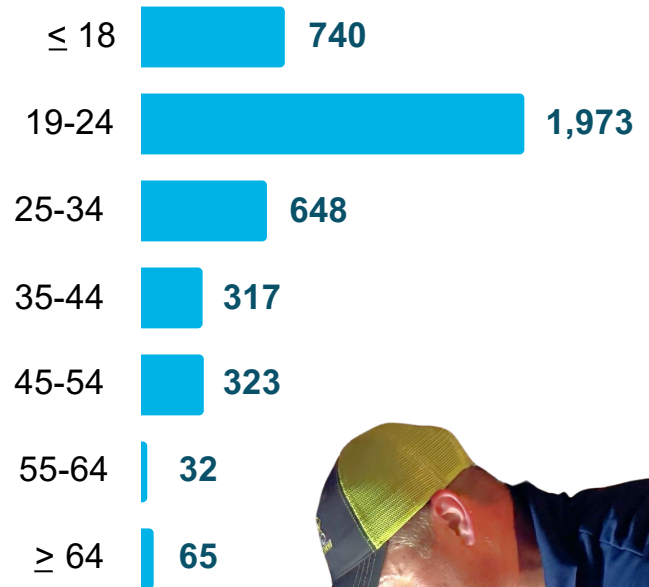


**\$14.41** average hourly wage of employed clients

## VR CASES BY DISABILITY



## VR CASES BY AGE



“Interacting with GVRA has been great. Starting a new business is never easy, but the assistance I got from GVRA gave me the confidence to form my home inspection company.”  
 — **Shane Giltner, U.S. Army Veteran**

# GVRA PROVIDES RECORD NUMBER OF SERVICES TO STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN FY 2024


Students with disabilities across the state received a record 32,372 Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) through the GVRA in FY 2024, paving the way for enhanced training and educational opportunities before entering the workforce. By comparison, GVRA provided 19,115 services in FY 2023 and 13,502 in FY 2022, respectively.

The number of services provided in FY 2020 was 17,461. In addition to record services, GVRA served 18,208 students in FY 2024.

Students aged 14 to 21, enrolled in an educational program with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 plan, are eligible for Pre-ETS. GVRA offers services through more than 130 providers throughout Georgia.

Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), GVRA is required to provide specific pre-employment services, including job exploration counseling, work-based learning instruction, self-advocacy training, transition counseling, and workplace readiness training for students with disabilities.


## YOUTH & STUDENT SERVICES



18,208

students with disabilities served


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32,372

Pre-ETS services provided to students with disabilities

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166

students transitioned into employment

# GVRA HOSTS CAREER EXPLORATION DAY WITH ATLANTA BRAVES

GVRA staff "hit it out of the park" June 2024 as more than 1,300 students with disabilities from all over Georgia participated in a day of career exploration and networking with the Atlanta Braves staff. Students also had the opportunity to attend the Atlanta vs. Pittsburgh game.

The Atlanta Braves staff shared information with students about their careers, discussed the paths to achieve career goals, and encouraged students to explore further areas of interest once they left the park. At the event, GVRA staff did an excellent job providing outreach to ensure that students and families were aware of

the services offered by GVRA, including post-secondary grant opportunities to help fund college education.



Students at the Atlanta Braves event

## FIFTY-THREE GRADUATES TURN TASSELS AT RWS COMMENCEMENT, EARN INDUSTRY CREDENTIALS

Each spring, it's difficult for graduates of Roosevelt Warm Springs Comprehensive Rehabilitation Center to say goodbye to the friends they made while residing at the historic campus. This year was no different, as 53 graduates gathered on May 23rd to accept their diplomas and bid farewell to their peers, instructors, and counselors. Highlights of the ceremony included remarks by Residential Director Dennis Medders and the presentation of diplomas by Assistant Residential Director Todd McRae amid cheers from family, friends, counselors and instructors. The graduates' notable achievements included:

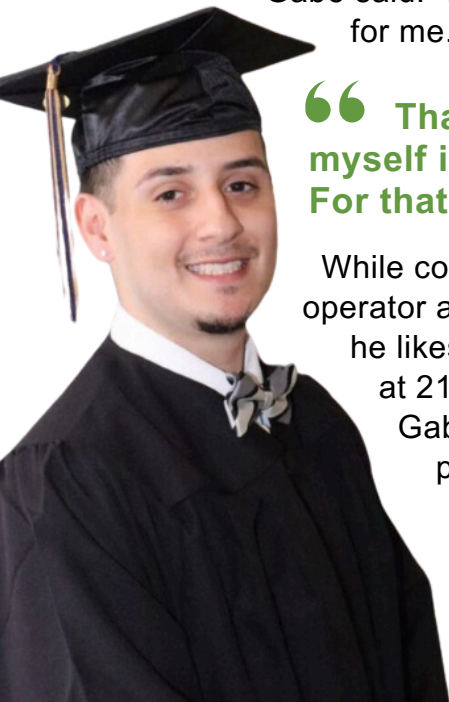
- ★ Thirteen Logistics students earned a total of 16 industry certifications from the MSSC (Manufacturing Skills Standards Council). Each also obtained his or her OSHA-10 certification.
- ★ Fifteen Retail students obtained 30 total certifications from the National Retail Federation.
- ★ Fifteen Hospitality students obtained more than 22 nationally accredited certifications from the American Hotel and Lodging Institute in areas including kitchen cook, guest room attendant, breakfast attendant, and front desk/reception specialist. Each of these students also completed the ServSafe food handler curriculum, which is a comprehensive program that includes courses in basic food safety, personal hygiene, cross-contamination and allergens, and more.

### GABE MATERNE, ROOSEVELT WARM SPRINGS MAY 2024 LOGISTICS/WAREHOUSING GRADUATE

"In high school I had a 504 Plan because I had been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). I didn't like math or science, and when my plans to enter the U.S. Army didn't work out, one of my high school teachers recommended the pathway programs at Roosevelt Warm Springs," Gabe said. "Enrolling at RWS turned out to be a positive, life-changing experience for me."

**“ Thanks to the support I received from my instructors, I find myself in a job that allows me to contribute to my family’s lifestyle. For that I will always be grateful.”**

While completing his studies at RWS, he applied for and was hired as a forklift operator at the Walmart Distribution Center in Douglas, Georgia. When asked if he likes his duties, Gabe indicated this position is a good starting point for him at 21 years of age. Reflecting on his academic experience at RWS, Gabe said he would wholeheartedly recommend the logistics pathway to potential students.



## GVRA ANNOUNCES BUD MCCALL GRANT

During FY24, the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA) announced the availability of the Bud McCall Post-Secondary Vocational Rehabilitation Grant, which allows up to \$17,725 to be awarded annually to eligible students with disabilities seeking post-secondary and other Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services.

GVRA’s announcement of the grant followed policy changes that removed the financial needs assessment as a requirement for individuals with disabilities seeking post-secondary opportunities. The changes became effective on January 1. Candidates for the grant must have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan. To be eligible, they also must have a permanent disability that results in a substantial

impediment to employment and be eligible for GVRA services. To apply, stakeholders can visit <https://gvs.georgia.gov/bud-mccall-grant>.

In addition to removing that barrier, GVRA increased the maximum grant amount to match funding offered through the Pell Grant. The Bud McCall Grant provides up to \$7,395 for tuition, \$9,430 for maintenance (room, board, and meals), and \$900 for books annually. The grant is named in memory of the first-born son of former State Representative Tom McCall and Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Services Board Member Jane McCall, whose love for others served as an inspiration to his family, friends, and the entire community.

## BUD MCCALL GRANT RECIPIENT FLIES HIGH AS A GEORGIA TECH UNDERGRADUATE

A native of Warner Robins, Saif Aslam was born with Ullrich Congenital Muscular Dystrophy (CMD), a degenerative disease which results in continued loss of physical abilities. In May 2024, Saif completed his freshman year at Georgia Tech. He is majoring in computer science, with a minor in business. Saif applied for, and received, GVRA’s Bud McCall grant, which provides financial assistance with tuition, books, and room and board.

“Georgia Tech staff and GVRA staff have helped me to further expand my goals – helping me to move forward against any obstacles that come my way.”

Not only is Saif an undergraduate student, but he is also an author. “I am publishing my second book soon. I’ve been working on it ever since I published my first children’s book titled, **What I Could’ve Been**,” Saif said. As Saif looks to the future, he is full of hope and optimism.



## GVRA OUTREACH ACHIEVEMENTS

From small resource fairs to large-scale public events, GVRA employees helped spread the word about the array of services we offer throughout the state.

As is the case at the beginning of each school year, GVRA was present at Atlanta Public Schools’ mega Back2School event at the Georgia World Congress Center. It was well attended, with approximately 8,000 students, parents, stakeholders, and guardians onsite.

In October, GVRA expanded its rural outreach by partnering with the Georgia National Fairgrounds and Agricenter in Perry to launch the inaugural Welcoming Our Workforce, or WOW, Wednesday. The GVRS Board meeting was held that day at the conference center, and a resource table staffed by GVRA volunteers was prominently featured near the clock tower to gain maximum exposure. According to GNFA administrators, WOW Wednesday was a record-breaking day, with 53,268 fairgoers passing through the gates.

In addition to making an impact through resource fairs, transition fairs, and hiring fairs, GVRA maintained a presence in virtual monthly meetings with the Rural Learning Network, a subgroup of the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. That longstanding relationship has produced numerous opportunities for GVRA to partner with such entities as the Georgia Chamber of Commerce and the Georgia Department of Education, among others.

## GVRA PARTNERSHIPS

The Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency works in collaboration with a wide range of community-based organizations across the state, including public, private, nonprofit, and for-profit entities.

- ★ Since March 2024, GVRA has partnered with Friends of Disabled Adults and Children (FODAC) to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities by providing home medical equipment (HME). Through this collaboration, FODAC has successfully fulfilled over 1,000 HME requests from GVRA clients, with an estimated total value of \$722,168.
- ★ Additionally, the Centers for Independent Living (CILs) in Georgia provide training, coaching, and resources to help individuals gain greater autonomy. GVRA is responsible for overseeing federal funding for CILs, working closely with the State Independent Living Council (SILC) and the nine participating CILs to implement the State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL).
- ★ Also, GVRA has increased its funding to the Georgia Radio Reading Service (GARRS) for fiscal year 2024, raising the total contract amount to \$400,000. This expanded funding supports GARRS in providing non-visual access to critical information for individuals who are visually impaired.



“A longtime supporter of SILCGA and the Centers for Independent Living Network, GVRA has partnered with SILCGA to extend independent living services across Georgia. As we work together to implement the state plan, we strive to enrich the lives of Georgians with disabilities.”

— Shelly Simmons, SILCGA



## GIB ENHANCES OPERATIONS AND INCREASES EMPLOYEE PAY

Building on the momentum it achieved through the purchase of an Omega paper sheeter for its production facility during the previous fiscal year, Georgia Industries for the Blind (GIB) realized cost savings by producing pressboard in-house for the classification folders it sells. Before purchasing the paper sheeter, GIB was paying \$0.99 per pound for cut pressboard. Now that it can cut pressboard onsite, GIB pays \$0.64 per pound to purchase rolls, and its employees cut the pressboard. All told, the cost savings are estimated to be \$163,050 per year.

Prudent financial management of the facility during FY 2024 paved the way for hiring additional employees and ushered in a pay increase for hourly workers. Leadership hired an office manager who handles Human Resources functions, Accounts Payable/Receivable, and Payroll. All assemblers at the plant received a pay increase; the amount of the raise was between \$0.60 to \$1.50 per hour. A proud employer of the Blind/Low Vision community, GIB promoted from within during the fiscal year. As a result, a folder assembler was promoted to shipping label clerk. Not to be outdone by competitors, GIB also expanded its imprint capabilities. In addition to its successful screen-printing operations, it has expanded product lines/offerings to include embroidered items such as shirts and backpacks.

### GIB EMPLOYEE FACTS



**44** total  
employees



**30** total Blind  
employees



**\$29,432** average  
employee salary at GIB

## SERVING THE BLIND/LOW VISION COMMUNITY

In FY 2024, the specialty Blind/Low Vision (BLV) counselors assigned to each GVRA district office continued to make an impact on the lives of their clients, thanks to an internal mandate requiring each district to house a dedicated BLV counselor.

Most notably, counselors concentrated on three areas that are key to the success of BLV clients. The first is mobility training, during which clients learn how to effectively use a white cane, how to navigate streets, and how to travel using mass transit. The second area is vision rehabilitation therapy, which addresses independent living skills such as how to cook, how to clean, and how to organize a living space. Finally, the third area revolves around technology training. Clients are afforded the opportunity to learn how to operate iPhones and computers. An additional aspect of technology training is a chance to learn how to use a Braille display device, which is an instrument that translates text from a smartphone, tablet, or computer into Braille.

To engage the BLV community and to heighten awareness of VR services, GVRA's Assistive Work Technology (AWT) department partnered with Centers for Independent Living (CILS) to offer smart device training. GVRA staff also participated in several BLV conferences during the fiscal year, including the Georgia Academy for the Blind (GAB) Alumni Weekend held May 16-19, 2024. Additionally, GVRA staff partnered with Eschenbach Optik of America to provide statewide training on the company's low-vision magnification products in all districts. GVRA staff also spearheaded monthly "Community of Practice" meetings for the agency's Blind/Low Vision counselors; conducted monthly meetings with contractors; and facilitated monthly Blind/Low Vision stakeholder meetings.

# LICENSED BLIND VENDOR SUCCEEDS IN BUSINESS, SERVES AS MENTOR TO BLIND YOUTH

“My goal is not only to operate a successful business, but to become a mentor for youth who are blind,” said Shelby Ball, a visually impaired vendor in the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency’s (GVRA) Business Enterprise Program (BEP). “I would like to provide a sense of encouragement to blind young people. I want them to know how BEP can benefit their lives.”

Ball, who is originally from Ohio but moved to Georgia in 1996, initially had misconceptions about the Business Enterprise Program. “Before doing research, I thought this program was designed to employ senior citizens,” she said. “After researching it, I realized this program benefits all age groups. It’s for people who want to become entrepreneurs in vending.”

To be eligible for the program, candidates must be legally blind, a U.S. citizen, and a GVRA client in the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program. Blind vendors who aspire to operate food service facilities in federal and state government buildings are given priority. The training is comprehensive, with candidates receiving instruction in food service management, customer service, menu planning, health and safety, and product merchandising.

Ball enthusiastically accepted the opportunity to participate in BEP in August of 2022. “In 2023, I completed my training and subsequently was awarded a facility. My provisional period began in July of 2023, and later I became a licensed vendor.”

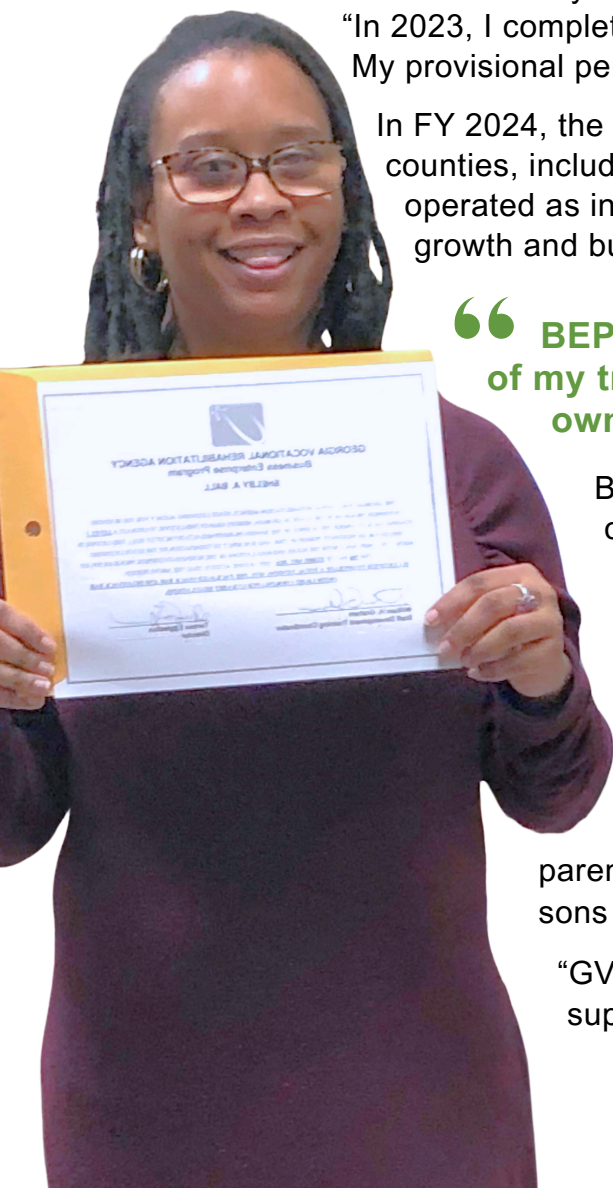
In FY 2024, the BEP program supported 49 vendors across more than 20 counties, including Fulton, DeKalb, Clayton, and Bibb counties. These vendors operated as integral parts of the BEP Program, contributing to local economic growth and business development.

**“BEP has given me a sense of belonging. With the support of my trainer and the VR team, I’ve learned how to be my own boss and to be successful.”**

Ball is licensed to operate vending stands in public buildings. She currently manages snack bars at the Sam Nunn Federal Building and the Georgia Department of Public Safety headquarters in Atlanta. When asked about her day-to-day responsibilities, Ball says she merchandises the snack bar and engages with customers to ensure they have a positive experience. She also manages two part-time employees.

Conducting business in the digital age requires Ball to utilize software to track inventory and to monitor her sales. A single parent, Ball spends time away from her job raising her three young sons in Cobb County.

“GVRA continues to assist me a great deal. I am grateful for the support I receive,” said Ball.



# ENHANCING DISABILITY CLAIMS PROCESSING AND RETENTION: SSA'S CENTRALIZED MULTIMODAL TRAINING INITIATIVE

The Social Security Administration developed centralized training based on a recommendation from the Recruitment and Retention Workgroup led by the Office of Disability Determinations (ODD). Comprised of DDS leaders and regional disability program experts, the group noted centralized Social Security Administration (SSA) training is one way to reduce the high number of initial pending claims and to improve DDS retention. As a result, training responsibilities burden is shifted away from other experienced staff in the DDS.

During the fiscal year, subject matter experts, including the Disability Adjudication Services (DAS) Training Team, identified a series of disability training topics for centralized training and created a phased-implementation approach for delivering centralized multimodal training. The centralized multimodal training concept blends classroom-based instruction via Adobe Connect with animated PowerPoint presentations, Videos on Demand, and other engaging multimedia lessons.

## DAS STATE FY2024 NUMBERS



**91,705** total cases closed



**60** total new employees



**94.9%** case determination accuracy rate

## DAS TRAINING TEAM RAISES THE BAR, RECEIVES 2024 SSA ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER'S AWARD

Congratulations to **Joellen Chapman, Ayanna Conley, and Elizabeth Mane**, members of the Disability Adjudication Services (DAS) Centralized Disability Examiner Training Team, who were recognized for their outstanding service to the public and for their commitment to implementing the Agency's goals by earning the 2024 SSA Associate Commissioner's Award.



# COMPREHENSIVE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PLAN AMONG GVRA FACILITIES UPDATES

GVRA completed a needs assessment for its current facilities and capital assets during FY 2024. As a result, the agency spearheaded short- and long-range projects in support of goals outlined in the strategic plan. In addition to addressing elements of the needs assessment, GVRA embarked on an agency-wide emergency preparedness plan for employees, clients, and stakeholders. The plan outlines potential emergencies, including:

- ★ **Fire Emergencies:** Evacuation procedures and coordination with local fire services.
- ★ **Flooding Events:** Mitigation strategies and evacuation plans.
- ★ **Severe Weather:** Shelter-in-place protocols and recovery measures.
- ★ **Terrorist or Bomb Threats:** Controlled evacuation and coordination with law enforcement.
- ★ **Medical Emergencies:** First-aid readiness and automated external defibrillators (AED) deployment protocols.

Capital projects that were completed by GVRA during FY 2024 include:

- ★ **Completion of Marietta Office:** The location in Marietta has been fully renovated.
- ★ **Employee Chair Upgrades:** In collaboration with Georgia Industries for the Blind (GIB), the agency procured 720 ergonomic chairs for employees across the Vocational Rehabilitation, Roosevelt Warm Springs, and Cave Spring programs.
- ★ **Enhanced Security Measures at Bainbridge GIB Plant:** To ensure compliance, GVRA installed a state-of-the-art security system that includes closed-circuit TV and fire alarms.
- ★ **Griffin Warehouse Bathroom Restoration:** The bathrooms at the Griffin warehouse were fully renovated.



GVRA Marietta office building

Of note is construction that began on the historic smokestack at Roosevelt Warm Springs. While the restoration project was not completed during the fiscal year, GVRA identified a contractor to oversee the project, and initial restoration began during FY 2024.

## 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

Michele Mason

Cherise Mlott

Joy Norman

Jennifer Page

Charity Roberts

Aarti Sahgal

Peggy Venable

Col. Dr. Samuel Verniero, Jr.

**GVRA**



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