NDEAM 2019

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GVRA

GEORGIA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AGENCY

In This Issue

Page 3 — Executive Director Shawn Ryan on NDEAM

Page 4 — Get to Know a Legislator

Page 5 — Meet the New Director of Provider Relations

Page 6 — DAS Rolls Out New Case Processing System

Page 7 and 8 — A Conversation with Susan Jolly

Page 9 — Bringing Accessibility to the Dome

Page 10 and 11 — From Client to CA

Page 12 — GVRS Proposed Calendar

Page 13 — Establishing a Foundation for Transition

Page 14 — Mud, Sweat and Smiles

Page 15 — To Protect and Serve

The future belongs to those who believe in the power of their dreams.

~ Eleanor Roosevelt

Executive Director Shawn Ryan on NDEAM
The Importance of What We Do

While we recognize the critical importance of National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) in October, every day of the year at Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA) is about opportunity and advancement for people with disabilities. Everything we do at GVRA must support our vision of competitive, integrated employment for all Georgians who want to work. We believe those we serve have a lot to offer their communities and potential employers, and we are honored to be a part of their journey to independence and professional success.

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Get to Know a Legislator

This Month We Feature Kevin Tanner

Kevin has spent 27 years in public service. He is serving in his third term as a State Representative for District 9, which includes Lumpkin and parts of Dawson and Forsyth counties. Prior to his first term as State Representative, Kevin was the Dawson County Manager where he oversaw day-to-day operations as the county's chief operating officer.

Kevin was recognized in 2011 as the Appointed Official of the Year by Georgia's Association of County Commissioners. In 2007, Georgia Trend Magazine named Kevin one of Georgia's 40 Under 40. He has also been recognized as one of Dawson County's Citizens of the Year.

Kevin started his career with Dawson County as a volunteer fireman in 1989. He then worked for the Dawson Sheriff's Office in 1990 where he served in many positions, including 11 years as Chief Deputy/ Undersheriff supervising all aspects of the department. Kevin is a successful small business owner of a security company where he provides armed and unarmed security guard services to various clients. He also owns Tanco Investments, LLC, a company with residential and commercial rental properties in several counties in North Georgia. Additionally, Kevin is a licensed light commercial contractor and primarily builds residential homes. Kevin received his undergraduate degree from North Georgia College and State University and earned his Masters of Public Administration from Columbus State University.

In addition to his career, Kevin has been heavily involved in community and civic activities in the North Georgia area for many years. He served as the vice chairman of the board of trustees for Chestatee Regional Hospital in Dahlonega and as a member of the Rainbow Children's Home board in Dahlonega. Kevin is a current member of the executive board of the Northeast Georgia Boy Scout Council and was appointed by Governor Perdue to serve as the 9th Congressional District Representative on the State Board of Corrections. He also served as the previous chairman and now serves as the vice chairman of the board of trustees of Lanier Technical College.

A committed family man, Kevin has been married to the former Stacie Pickering for more than eighteen years. Stacie is a first grade public school teacher, and they are the proud parents of three beautiful daughters: Kaitlyn, 15; Abbie, 13 and Chloe, 9. All three of their daughters attend public school. A man of faith, Kevin serves as a deacon and adult Sunday school teacher at Bethel Baptist Church where his family has attended church for seven generations.

Partnership is Key

A Conversation with Sheila Pierce

Below is a brief chat with Sheila Pierce, GVRA's new Director of Provider Management. It has been lightly edited for clarity.

What brought you to GVRA?

I was interested in doing something different career wise. I heard about the programming here. It's something I'm interested in, and I look forward to helping.

What did you do before joining GVRA?

I was at the Department of Public Health. I was responsible for overseeing the prescription drug monitoring program, the HB1 low-THC program, and coordinator for the opioid misuse and prevention program as part of a federal grant.

What do you hope to accomplish?

I hope for a better working relationship with the providers who deliver services to our clients in the VR program. I'm hoping to set a benchmark that says "we want to work together and build up from there." I'm working to understand providers on their own turf talking to them to get to know what's working and what's not working for them. I want to understand from the staff perspective, the things that are getting in our way and preventing us from accomplishing the things that will make us successful. At some point I'd like to connect the dots and speak with some of our clients who receive services as well to find out what their experience is after going through the VR process.
I've been given priorities by both [Vocational Services Director] Christine [Fleming] and [Executive Director] Shawn [Ryan], and that's where I'm starting. One is to update the Provider Outsourcing Manual … to that end I have picked up from the work started by Denine Woodson that includes working with providers, GATES members and GVRA staff. We divided the manual into sections and asked groups of providers and staff to work together to identify what is missing, out of date, etc. It'll take us a couple of weeks to incorporate all of the changes received, then we'll get back together with the group and let them see where we are. Once we get approval from that group—hopefully around the first of November—we will be ready to pass the draft document on to Christine for her review and approval, and with her approval it will be ready for the Executive Director to review before releasing. We hope to have it ready for his review no later than the end of November. A lot of

pieces must come together for us to meet this schedule but we are starting with a plan and can be flexible if we need to be. Sometime in December or early January we hope to be ready to share the updated document with the provider community across the state. The rollout will include some networking opportunities, introductions of new leadership, letting providers know what updates are being made in the Manual and asking them to be our partner as we continue to work to improve our operations.

This will lead us into the next area, which is new provider on-boarding process.

Why do you think collaboration and relationships with the provider community are important?

We are contracting with providers so that they can deliver services that our clients need. To me, if we can't connect the dots and work well with our providers, we're missing an opportunity. We want to be partners with them. Once they provide services, we want to monitor the work to make sure that it is a good experience for clients and that the anticipated outcome has been achieved. There is no way to see success without the providers included.

New Technology

DAS Rolls Out New Case Processing System

In late September, Disability Adjudication Services receipted its first cases in a new Disability Case Processing System (DCPS)! DAS will process these cases completely from receipt to closure, ensuring that the system works as expected.

Thanks to DAS staff who are involved in the piloting of DCPS (pictured below).

DAS will continue the rollout slowly receipting more cases and adding more users throughout the coming months.

Congratulations on all the hard work paying off!

Cracking the Code to Success

Susan Jolly Tells Her Story

Susan Jolly is the Chief of Staff for the VP of the Digital Services Group at T-Mobile. She's also a technologist, mentor, and mother who's spent her career as an individual with a disability. After sustaining life-changing injuries during college, Susan spent 11 years investing in herself and finishing her degree. Since then, she's moved across the country, raised a son, and built a successful career in technology. Like many, her journey is riddled with challenges and successes. At every turn, she focused on what is possible, rather than what is difficult. Now, she's got a bit of advice for those building careers amid adversity.

What do you do?

I serve as the Chief of Staff for the VP of the Digital Services Group. My team supports the Design Services Intake and Innovation (DSI2) and Business Management Operations (BMO) teams respectively. The DSI2 assesses how much work is involved in completing certain tasks. We complete high level designs that become proof of concepts that eventually become real products. The BMO involves managing a budget of more than $110M and supporting several vendors.

Susan's Pro-tip: Define Your 'Brand' and Be it: For example, I am a trusted leader who can drive results and deliver solutions while enabling others to reach their full potential. I live, breathe, eat, and sleep this so when people meet me it comes across.

What advice would you give those who are just starting out in their career?

The first thing you need to do is set goals, and not just goals for your career. Set your goals for what you're going to do in different aspects of your life. There's a tool that I like to use called Wheel of Life and you can type it on Google and find that tool. Do a self-evaluation on different aspects of your life—your financials, your physical environment and you rate yourself on your family relationships and then come up with goals; short, medium and long-term goals around each of those.

Susan's Pro-tip: Reward yourself: When you accomplish goals, give yourself a little something for your trouble. It may be a dinner out early in your career… and later a multi-state road trip vacation. This will keep you motivated and focused on the next step.

What has been most critical to your success?

I always felt like I had more to prove and I never wanted anybody to question my ability to do the job, whether I was disabled or not. And I knew that I was being compared to people who were not disabled so I didn't work just forty hours a week. I worked—in the early days—60 to 80 hours a week, and I did that for many years. I made a choice to sacrifice and invest the sweat equity to get where I am in my career.

Susan's Pro-tip: Leverage Sweat Equity: Volunteer to fill in gaps others aren't filling. Doing so strategically will not only demonstrate your unique value, but also show your willingness to contribute to the overall success of the team/organization.

How do you deal with setbacks?

I recently read a book last year called The Obstacle is The Way, and it really

reminded me how to use the obstacles put before you to solve problems. It's a really good book, and I recommend that you read that to kind of think through how can you use the obstacles that you have to help you be better in your career.

Pro-tip: Use Motivational Books to refocus: when negative thoughts enter your mind read/listen to good books to help reinforce success (i.e. Obstacle is the Way, Girl Wash your Face, Be So Good They Can't Ignore You)

To learn more about Susan and her work at T-Mobile, watch our video highlighting her story.

Accessible to All

GVRA's Russell Fleming Brings Accessibility to MLS

Atlanta United Soccer team is winning in many ways! Since their start, Atlanta United has won in accessibility by having American Sign Language (ASL) translation at every home game. One of GVRA's own, Director of Cave Spring Center Russell Fleming, recently presented the Star Spangled banner in ASL for the crowd at the Mercedes Benz Dome in Atlanta. His daughter, Heather Fleming, incoming freshman at Georgia Tech, lent a hand in the interpretation. Much appreciation goes to Russell and the team for making the game more accessible for all fans!

From Client to CA

And the Value of Seeing Both Sides

When you walk into the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA) office in Columbus on any given day, you might find Counselor Assistant Walker Green compiling records, gathering client information or explaining to a family what to expect from the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) process. Professional, thorough and responsible, Walker is a true believer in the ability of the right supports to change a person's future trajectory.

Things were much different seven years ago. Walker was a new client, and he wasn't so sure how VR fit into life after graduation from Dunwoody High School. Then, someone suggested what was then referred to as the Roosevelt Warm Springs (RWS) Institute for Rehabilitation. Immediately, Walker balked.

"I was like 'I'm not going there. It has the word institute in the name,'" he said. "I didn't really realize what it was."

Fast forward five years to late 2017. While volunteering at an assisted living facility, the subject of attending RWS came up again, and this time around, the moment felt right. When Walker decided to attend, he didn't realize he was making a choice that would impact everything that came after.

"When I got there, I realized it was more like college. You have dorms and your friends and classes. Just like college," Walker said.

It was there, he said, that he began to really figure out his life direction. At a younger age, he thought he might be a teacher, and while he had decided that teaching wouldn't be the best fit, he still wanted to help people. He started a work study on campus, and then, as fate would have it, his second work study assignment was at the GVRA office in Columbus.

GVRA helped him become more confident and more prepared to take on whatever the future would hold. So, he reasoned, a job at GVRA would allow him to help others like himself. After graduating from RWS in May of 2018 and working with his way through the applicant process, he was hired at GVRA to work as a counselor assistant.

While he had expectations about the VR process when he was going through it, being a part of the system itself helped him understand the thoroughness of it.

"He gets it because he's seen both sides of it," said Walker's Counselor Tia Ricks. "It's great to see."

Walker agreed, saying his time as client shaped his understanding of his current job.

"I now realize how much time things take," Walker said. "It's part of my job to request medical records, and those can take weeks to receive … Everyone wants things to happen quickly, but it takes time."

And for those like him who may still have some lingering doubts about VR or RWS, he had some simple advice.

"Just try it," he said. "You won't know if it's for you unless you try. I did, and I'm so glad I did."

"Just try it. You won't know if it's for you unless you try"
- Walker Green

Proposed Annual Schedule

Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Services Board

Full Session

Wednesday, January 8, 2020
Wednesday, March 11, 2020
Wednesday, May 13, 2020
Wednesday, July 8, 2020
Wednesday, September 9, 2020
Tuesday, November 10, 2020 **Day deviation due to Veterans Day*

Pictured left to right: Chairman Rep. Tom McCall and Mrs. Jane McCall, GVRS Board Chairman Tom Wilson, GVRA Board Legislative Liaison Charlie Miller, Gov. Brian Kemp, GVRA Exec. Director Shawn Ryan, GVRS Board Secretary Sandy Adams, GVRS Board Member Craig Camuso.

Good to Great

Establishing a Foundation for Transition

A well-trained workforce is a productive workforce. This isn't so much a saying or the vaunted wisdom of a famous CEO so much as it is common sense. A workforce that has the tools to succeed will likely do so.

This is why GVRA team members has been busy in recent weeks and months creating a manual that will serve as a guideline for how field staff handle transition cases. This document will be the genesis from which all transition-related training will come in the future, said Vocational Services Director Christine Fleming. Establishing a solid training program throughout Vocational Rehabilitation will not only improve services but it will ensure those services are delivered consistently regardless of which VR office a client arrives at.

"We want to set a consistent set of standards of performance and hold to those standards," Christine said. "Training gives folks the knowledge to do the job and ensures that our clients are getting the best service we can provide."

This will both pave the way for long-term GVRA employees to stay up to speed while also ensuring that new staff members have the information they need to do their job, said Residential Services and Transition Director Lee Brinkley Bryan. In addition, consistent and clear training will ensure skills are learned quicker and can be applied more efficiently, she said.

"We've got a lot of staff who have been in their positions short term and haven't had a lot of subject-matter-specific training necessary for them to nourish those new skills," Lee said. "If you don't have procedures that are written and clear for staff to reference, you can train repeatedly, but it doesn't support them in skill retention."

Examples of the kind of information that will be contained in the document include: the role of the VR professional in transition planning, information on how to effectively do local-level planning in small vs. large districts, understanding the types of services within the five required Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), how to identify when is the best time for a case to move from being a Pre-ETS case to applying to become a VR Eligible client and general best practices for helping clients transition from high school to whatever comes next.

In the coming weeks, VR leadership will review the document, and once approved, it will go to GVRA Executive Director Shawn Ryan for final approval. It should be distributed to the field in early 2020 if not sooner. Finalization of this document will be followed by the creation of a dedicated GVRA transition website.

The completion of the document itself helped staff get a better handle on how a client moves through the steps of transition—from high school to post secondary or into the workforce, said Education Program Specialist Sue Kizer, who helped draft the document.

"As we wrote this manual, it helped us understand the transition steps," Sue said. "We are hopeful it help others understand the process."

Mud, Sweat and Smiles

On CTI Emerging Leaders

Developing strong leadership and team skills is not an easy task but ask any of the 200 Georgia Career and Technical Instruction (CTI) students who attended CTI Emerging Leaders B.A.S.I.C. Training, and they will tell you that those skills are critical to achieving goals and objectives.

CTI students came together September 19 for a day of leadership and teambuilding activities at a camp in Covington.

Students were assigned to groups and presented various challenges (pictured below) to complete. Students learned to assume leadership roles, that every team member contributes to team success and that communication and trust in each other is critical.

Participation in CTI Emerging Leaders B.A.S.I.C. Training was made possible for 131 students through partnership with the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency. United in the mission to provide quality services, GVRA and Georgia CTI work together in providing CTI students with meaningful life-learning experiences.

To Protect and Serve

RWS Police Complete Autism Training

In an effort to provide high quality service to students, every member of the Roosevelt Warm Springs Police Force has recently completed the "Autism and De-escalation" course offered by the Georgia Public Service Training Center.

The course included a thorough overview of behavioral characteristics associated with autism spectrum disorder and suggested numerous strategies that police officers can employ when they encounter persons with ASD on the job.

"A significant percentage of RWS students have an ASD diagnosis," said Police Chief Jeff Boatwright, "and we want to be prepared to respond appropriately when situations arise. Every member of the police force has taken the course, and I plan to make the training a part of each new officer's orientation."

"Accolades to RWS facility police in being proactive about learning strategies to interact with those diagnosed with ASD," said Dr. Kim Lawson, RWS Director of Psychology Services. "Staff in the Psychology Department," she continued, "can tell you painful and horrifying stories that our students tell about interactions with law enforcement in the community. The vast majority relate to a lack of understanding about the ASD and about helpful ways to interact and communicate. The wonderful part is that many of these strategies also can be applied to those with other types of disabilities."

Good communication is critical in any crisis situation involving a person with ASD. The following are some of the recommendations made in the course: talk calmly and softly, speak in short direct sentences, avoid slang, repeat or rephrase statements if necessary, allow for delayed responses and do not interpret a failure to respond as deliberate resistance or an excuse to use increased force.

Police officers might be called at any time to search for a child with ASD that has wandered away or "eloped" from home or from guardians. Children with ASD often have a fascination with water and traffic, and this can put the child in grave danger during a wandering episode.

According to course material from the National Autism Association, children with ASD are four times more likely to wander than their siblings without the disorder. Analyzing wandering episodes from 2011 to 2016, the Association found that the most common places that wandering children were found was near water or near traffic. Accidental drowning may be the most common cause of death among children with ASD that have wandered away from safe places. Data from 2009 to 2011 showed that %91 of all deaths of wandering children with ASD were caused by accidental drowning.

Therefore, the Association recommends that nearby bodies of water be among the first places searched for missing children with ASD.

The National Autism Association has many helpful documents about keeping children with ASD safe. The documents can be found on the association's web page at https://nationalautismassociation.org.