

# Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency

January 10, 2024

## **GVRS Board Meeting**

Tom Wilson, Board Chairman



# Chairman's Welcome

- ❖ Welcome and Remarks
- ❖ Roll Call and Agenda

# Consent Agenda

- ❖ Previous Board Meeting Minutes Approval
- ❖ Budget Report
- ❖ Annual Report

**MEETING MINUTES OF THE  
GEORGIA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES BOARD  
October 11, 2023  
1:00 PM – 3:05 PM  
Georgia National Fairgrounds and Agriculture Center  
Perry, Georgia 31069**

**BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT:**

Tom Wilson (Chair)  
Faye Perdue (Vice Chair)  
Sandy Adams (Secretary)  
Craig Camuso  
Suzanne Dooley (attended virtually)  
Louise Hill  
Vincent Martin (attended virtually)  
Jane McCall  
Jimmy Defoor (Chair Emeritus)  
GVRA Executive Director Chris Wells (Non-Member)

**BOARD MEMBERS ABSENT:**

Johnathan Taylor

**The History of Rehabilitation in Georgia**

Mike Shadix, Historian and Librarian for Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute, presented the “Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency History: A Century of Collaboration, Growth and Change.”

**Proclamation**

John Pilgrim, Public Affairs/Communications Staff Member, read a proclamation by the Governor of the State of Georgia proclaiming October 2023 as Disability Employment Awareness Month in the State of Georgia.

**Special Recognition**

Executive Director Chris Wells recognized the following special guests in celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and as a token of appreciation for their continued support of the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency and service to individuals with disabilities, each was presented with a commemorative plaque.

- Dan Regenstein, Chief of Staff, Georgia Department of Administrative Services
- Ron Wakefield, Director of the Division of Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities, Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities
- Charlotte Densmore, Public Policy Director, Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities
- Superintendent Richard Woods, Georgia Department of Education
- Caitlyn Hyatt, Chief Operations Officer of Association Services Group, and Georgia Association of Training, Employment & Supports Member
- Louis DeBroux, Chief of Staff, Georgia Department of Labor
- Marty Smith, State Property Officer, Georgia Building Authority



# **MEETING MINUTES OF THE GEORGIA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES BOARD**

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- Commissioner Jason Shaw, Public Service Commission
- Deputy Commissioner Rusty Rodgers, Department of Juvenile Justice
- Emily Hatchett, Deputy Director of Governmental Affairs, Department of Human Services
- Tina Herring, Assistant Director of Existing Industry and Regional Recruitment, Georgia Department of Economic Development
- Tom McCall, Georgia Farm Bureau President & Former State Representative who drafted House Bill 1146 establishing the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency in 2012

Executive Director Wells further welcomed additional special guests:

- Kirk Shook, Executive Director, Georgia Nonpublic Postsecondary Education Commission
- Juliet Hardeman, Georgia State Rehabilitation Council Chairwoman

## **Opening, Welcome, and Invocation**

GVRS Board Chair Tom Wilson welcomed everyone in attendance, and the meeting was called to order at 1:01 p.m. The Chairman asked Mrs. Faye Perdue, Vice Chair, to deliver the invocation.

## **Approval of Agenda**

Chairman Wilson performed a roll call and recommended approval of the agenda. On motion of Secretary Adams, seconded by Vice Chair Perdue and unanimously carried, the Board approved the agenda.

## **Consent Agenda**

The Chairman recommended approval of the Consent Agenda, consisting of the following:

- Approve Board Meeting Minutes from Previous Session
- Approve Budget Report
- Approve Completed Strategic Plan

On motion by Vice Chair Perdue, seconded by Mrs. Hill and unanimously carried, the Board approved the Consent Agenda.

## **GVRA Staff Updates/Reports:**

### **Executive Director Report – Executive Director Chris Wells**

- Executive Director Wells recognized the following employees:
  - Jason Turner, a supervisor in Disability Adjudication Services (DAS), received the Social Security Administration’s Associate Commissioner’s Honor
  - Thi (Sara) Pham, an employee in the Office of Fiscal Services, was chosen as the July employee of the month.
  - All FY2023 Employees of the Month were recognized with lunch at Rays in the City and Amazon gift cards. Their managers were also invited to attend the luncheon.

## **MEETING MINUTES OF THE GEORGIA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES BOARD**

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- Executive Director Wells provided recent updates regarding agency news such as:
  - GVRA was awarded a \$10.5 million grant to improve economic self-sufficiency for children and youth with disabilities.
  - GIB in Bainbridge celebrated production milestones and accomplishments.
  - GVRA rolled out the PowerDMS system, a new online platform for policies, standard operating procedures, and associated forms and attachments.
  - GVRA launched a new internal agency homepage giving employees immediate access to news, upcoming events, and quick links to resources.
  - Hecht Burdeshaw Architects, Inc. will design the renovations to RWS Georgia Hall and Quadrangle.
  - BEP is now offering vending on the RWS campus and a Micro Mart at the Department of Public Safety facility.

### **Client Services Updates – Director Jennifer Howell**

- Client Services Director Howell provided an update to the Board of highlights within her area, including the number of cases successfully closed for the federal fiscal year, the current number of vocational rehabilitation clients being served, and the number of PTS cases. Ms. Howell further shared that Client Services is maintaining their exceeding status rates at 97% for Determination of Eligibility and 94.4% for Individualized Plan for Employment completions.
- Client Services has 109 counselors on staff, including 6 interns and 3 part-time counselors. The first hiring fair for GVRA Field Offices was held in College Park for Districts 2 and 3, creating offers to 18 new counselors.
- Client Services continues to partner with Shepherd Center to improve the vocational, health, and financial outcomes for persons with the most severe TBIs, with 12 processed referrals to date.

### **Roosevelt Warm Springs Updates – Residential Director Chip Medders**

- Director Medders shared what Pre-Employment Services (Pre-ETS) are and how they help prepare high school students for future employment.
- Director Medders shared the strategic plan for the newly created District 10, which provides services to Troup, Meriwether, Pike, Upson, Talbot, Heard, and Harris counties. There are 4 liaisons delivering Pre-ETS to students in these counties, serving 46% of all students with disabilities. To date, District 10 has received 189 referrals and realized an average of 15% increase in students served since building relationships with schools in these counties.

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**Georgia Agribusiness Experience – Mason Dean, AgrAbility Field Coordinator for South Georgia, and Kyle Haney, UGA Rural Health Manager**

- Mason Dean and Kyle Haney shared information regarding the AgrAbility Program, which is housed at the University of Georgia under the College of Agriculture and Environmental Services and the College of Family of Consumer Sciences. AgrAbility was first introduced in the 1990 Farm Bill and in 1991 eight states were funded. Today, there are twenty-one AgrAbility projects across the nation.
- AgrAbility clients are those in production agriculture growing or raising a commodity. Over 1,400 Georgia farm families have participated in project activities, with a significant increase in the number of military veterans seeking services. They partner with GVRA and GFB to secure these services.
- Mr. Dean and Mr. Haney shared case studies of actual clients and the services provided at no cost, such as expertise in disability, agriculture and assistive technologies to recommend appropriate adaptations and production changes; fabricating and installing assistive technology equipment on farms; volunteer days; and coordinate funding and services on behalf of the farmer through foundations and other agencies.

**Old Business/New Business**

There was no old or new business to discuss. To this point, Chairman Wilson recommended that the GVRS Board not schedule any further meetings for 2023 and if something comes up that needs to be brought before the Board, they could schedule a virtual meeting.

On motion by Mr. Camuso, seconded by Mrs. McCall and unanimously carried, the Board approved the Chairman's recommendation.

**Special Recognition**

Executive Director Chris Wells spoke about the McCall family and the legacy of their son, Bud. He then read a poem carried by Mr. Tom McCall since Bud's birth in 1985, "To All Parents" by Edgar Guest.

Chairman Wilson recognized special guests – members of the McCall family and employees of the Georgia Farm Bureau – and read a Proclamation of the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Services Board Recognizing and Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the National Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Extraordinary Contributions and Dedication of Mr. Tom McCall to the Advancement of Vocational Rehabilitation Services in Our State. The Proclamation acknowledged the inspiration of Tom McCall's son, Bud, and honored the McCall's legacy by renaming the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Scholarship as the "Bud McCall Postsecondary Vocational Rehabilitation Grant."

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Executive Director Wells announced that beginning January 2024, all financial needs assessments will be removed as a barrier for those seeking post-secondary education. The amount of the previous Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency scholarship will be increased to match funding offered through the Pell Grant. This amount covers \$7,395 for tuition, \$900 for books, and \$9,140 for maintenance (room, board, and meals) and equates to a maximum amount of \$17,435 annually, or \$8,718 per semester.

**Public Comment**

Chairman Wilson opened the floor for public comment.

- Juliet Hardeman, Chairwoman of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), reported that there are now 18 members on the SRC. Mrs. Hardeman stated that the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) is underway and asked for support from the GVRS Board and GVRA by taking the survey. Mrs. Hardeman closed by sharing that there are 65,000 students in Georgia eligible for Pre-ETS services and asked that the SRC and GVRS Board strategize on ways to spread the word.
- Board Member Craig Camuso thanked everyone for the momentum he is seeing throughout the Agency.
- Chair Emeritus Jimmy Defoor shared that he is delighted to see what GVRA is doing to move in the right direction.

**Adjournment**

- Chairman Wilson called for a motion to adjourn, On motion of Mrs. Hill, seconded by Mr. Camuso, the board unanimously voted to adjourn the meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:05 p.m.

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GEORGIA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES BOARD  
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**Official Minutes Statement**

The foregoing Minutes for the October 11, 2023, Regular Meeting of the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Services Board were approved and adopted by the Board at the Board's meeting on \_\_\_\_\_ (TBD) \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Tom Wilson, Chair

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sandy Adams, Secretary

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

# FY 2024 Agency Budget Comparison

Category	Total Expenditures	Current Budget	Percent to Budget
Personal Services	\$36,871,146	\$90,204,873	41%
Regular Operating Expenses	4,632,349	6,297,731	74%
Motor Vehicle Expenses	-	-	
Equipment	513,684	176,754	291%
IT Expenditures	1,722,412	5,077,689	34%
Real Estate Rentals	3,478,336	7,720,942	45%
Telecommunications	683,092	2,354,998	29%
Capital Projects/Outlay	746,622	-	
Contractual Services	11,734,343	13,875,564	85%
Transfers	-	135,000	
Grants and Benefits	3,577,287	3,773,199	95%
Other	569,144	664,478	86%
DAS Case Services	10,168,088	21,060,000	48%
VR Case Services	15,285,954	31,787,377	48%
<b>Total Expenditures</b>	<b>\$89,985,458</b>	<b>\$183,128,605</b>	<b>49%</b>





**Georgia Vocational  
Rehabilitation Agency**

# **ANNUAL REPORT**

STATE FISCAL YEAR 2023

[www.gvs.georgia.gov](http://www.gvs.georgia.gov)

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# Our Mission and Programs

**T**he mission of the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA) is to help individuals with disabilities to become productive members of society by achieving independence and meaningful employment. Primarily, GVRA accomplishes this goal by providing services through five 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 GVR 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.

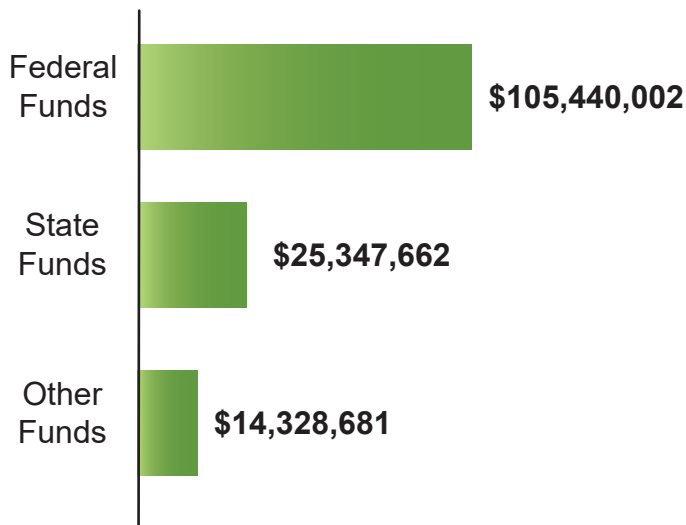
On behalf of the board, I want to thank Executive Director Chris Wells, his senior leadership team, and GVRA employees for their hard work. We look forward to continued success in the future.

### Thomas W. Wilson

GVRS Board Chairman

# GVRA by the Numbers

## FY 2023 Funding by Fund Type

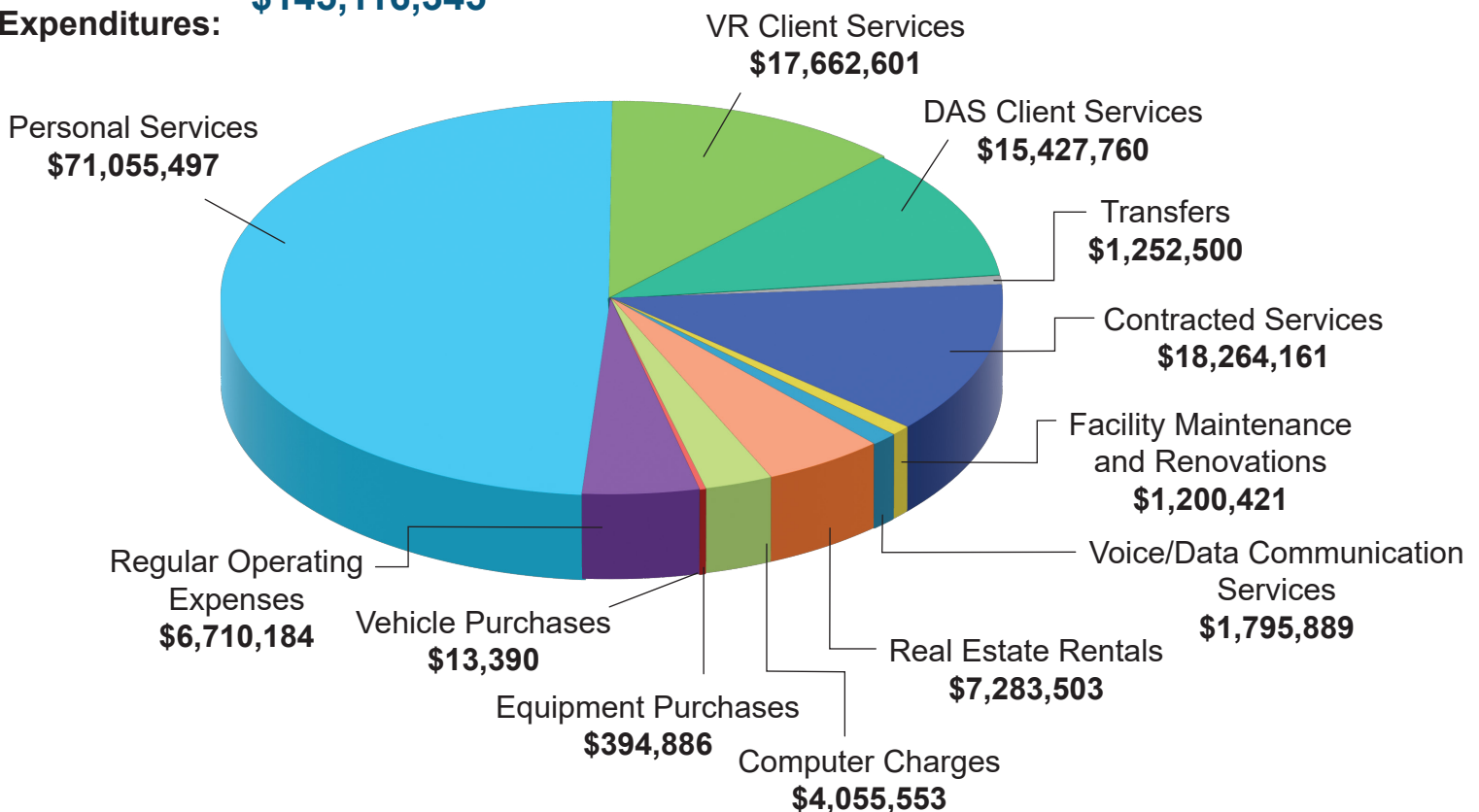


## Budget Highlights

- ★ \$7.8 million in General Obligation Bonds to address the most critical repairs on the historical 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**

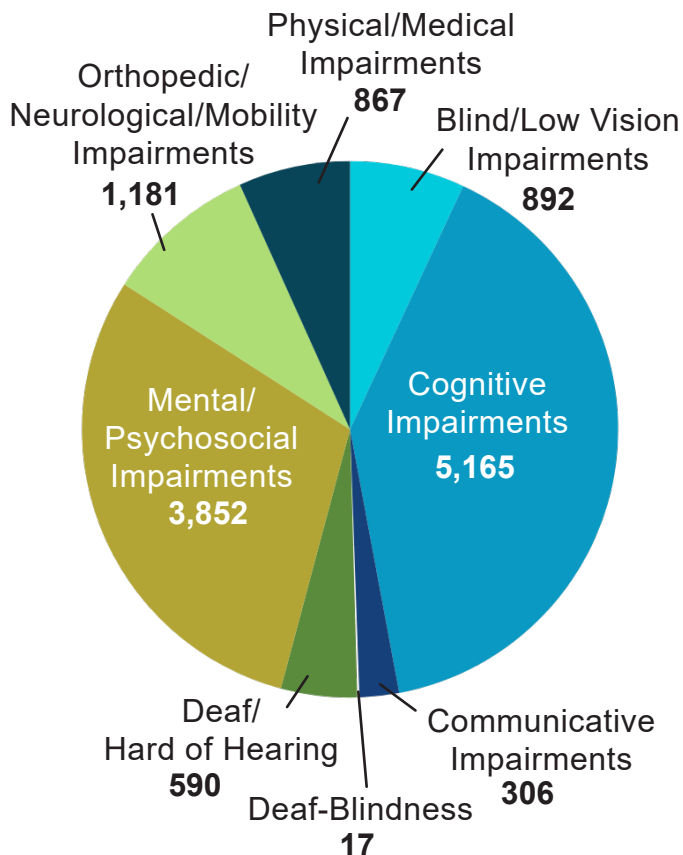


## Counselor Salaries for FY 2022 and FY 2023

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	

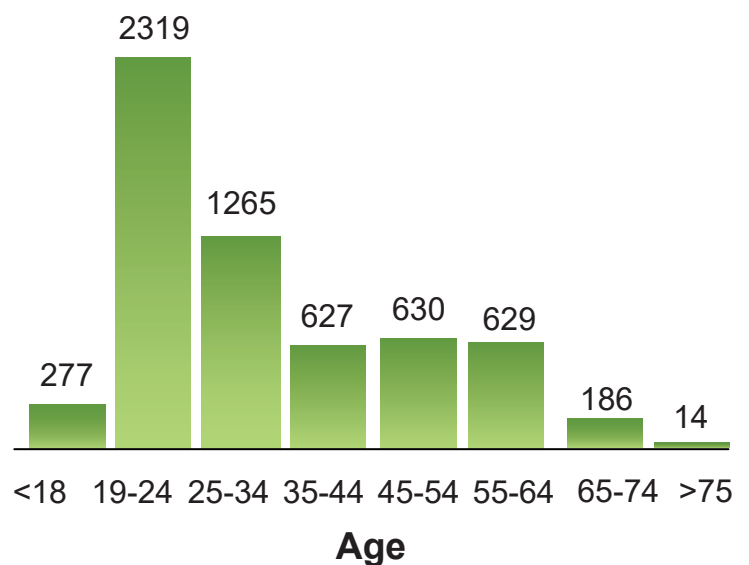
- ★ The Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor entry salary was increased by 10% in FY 2023 as an agency strategy to recruit new counselors and improve the retention rate of current employees.
- ★ GVRA's retention rate declined from 13% in FY 2022 to 3% in FY 2023, following the improvement in counselors' pay. The retention 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.

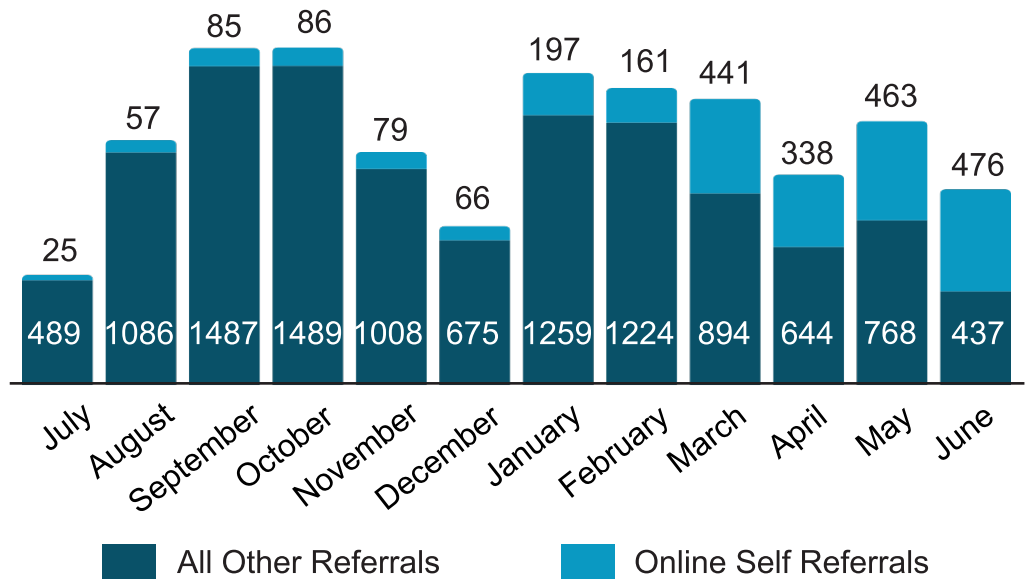


# Vocational Rehabilitation Services

## 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

**W**hen 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



## 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



Auto Detailing 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.

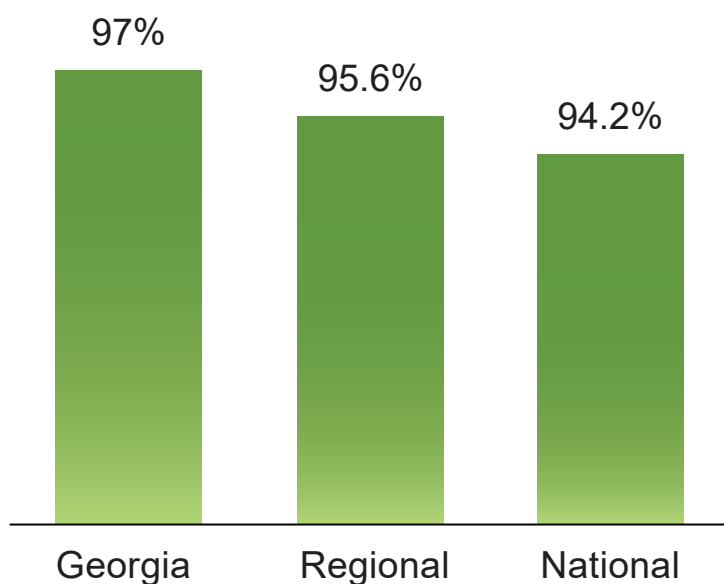
In FY 2023, using \$251,800 in state funds, GIB's leadership purchased an Omega paper sheeter for its production facility, with the goal of reducing the reliance on paperboard suppliers. Additionally, GVRA was awarded a \$40,000 grant from the National Industries for the Blind (NIB) and plans to use 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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# Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency

January 10, 2024

## **GVRS Board Meeting**

Chris Wells, Executive Director

[Chris.Wells@gvs.ga.gov](mailto:Chris.Wells@gvs.ga.gov)



# Agency Spotlight



**Moses Little**, is the October employee of the month. Moses works at the Athens office. Although he has only been with VR for less than two years, but he is already managing a full specialty caseload of our blind or vision-impaired clients, and he has just been accepted to attend the Vision Specialist program at Mississippi State University.

Moses portrays all of the values that GVRA wants and expects from its staff. He always presents a professional and calm demeanor. He is always cheerful and exhibits a genuine caring attitude toward all clients and visitors to the office. Moses takes the time to acknowledge the efforts of others and expresses his gratitude for even the smallest act of assistance from a co-worker. Regardless of the workload or the request, Moses jumps right in with a "Let's Do This" attitude. Moses' calm, professional and friendly demeanor puts everyone at ease and helps de-escalate any intense situation or angry client.

# Agency Spotlight



**Cara Lofton**, is the November employee of the month. Cara is the Administrative Assistant for District 8.

Cara ensures the team is aware of deadlines for training and provides individual area resource lists, which allows District 8 team members to share GVRA information with the public. Cara further assists in the training of new office assistants, orders all supplies for the district, and pulls all reports required to keep the D8 team on track. Cara has been out in the community providing different agencies and businesses with the GVRA flyer and referral information to assist in building D8 team's numbers, in addition to continuing with her other duties. Because of Cara's community engagement, D8 can serve more clients with disabilities, receive services, and gain employment.

Cara also makes sure everyone in D8 feels loved through a shout-out on their birthday by sending out a unique birthday email.

# Legislation

## Current and Anticipated Bills Impacting GVRA Clients

### Anticipated

- Blind and Low Vision Bills
  - Bills would create an independent commission seeking to offer additional independent living services for individuals who are blind and/or have low vision.
  - Bill would remove the Georgia Industries for the Blind (GIB), Older Blind, Business Enterprise, Independent Living, and vocational services for the blind.
- Healthcare
  - Expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act

### Current

- Georgia Pathways to Coverage
  - Offers Medicaid coverage to eligible Georgians ages 19-64 with a household income of up to 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), are not otherwise eligible for traditional Medicaid, and meet the qualifying activities threshold.
  - Qualifying activity requirements will only apply to Pathways, not those enrolled in other Georgia Medicaid programs.
  - Enrolling in GVRA services is a qualifying event making our client potentially eligible.





# Legislation

## 2024 Calendar Year Laws (January 1, 2024)

- SB 20 - Consumer Access To Contracted Healthcare (Catch) Act
  - Ensures consumer access to quality healthcare by setting adequacy standards for network plans offered by insurers and guarantees that everyone with insurance has access to primary and specialty care; mental healthcare; pharmacies and laboratories; and substance abuse treatment programs
- HB 1013 - Georgia's Mental Health Parity Act
  - Requires that health care insurance plans that provide coverage for mental health treatment of substance use disorders do so in accordance with the federal Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008. Health insurers must also provide an annual comparative analysis report to the insurance commissioner.
- HB 1437 – Income Tax Rates
  - Replaces the current graduated personal income tax with a flat rate of 5.49% effective Jan. 1, 2024, with gradual rate reductions until the flat rate reaches 4.99%. The rate reductions can be delayed by a year for each year if necessary.

# Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency

January 10, 2024

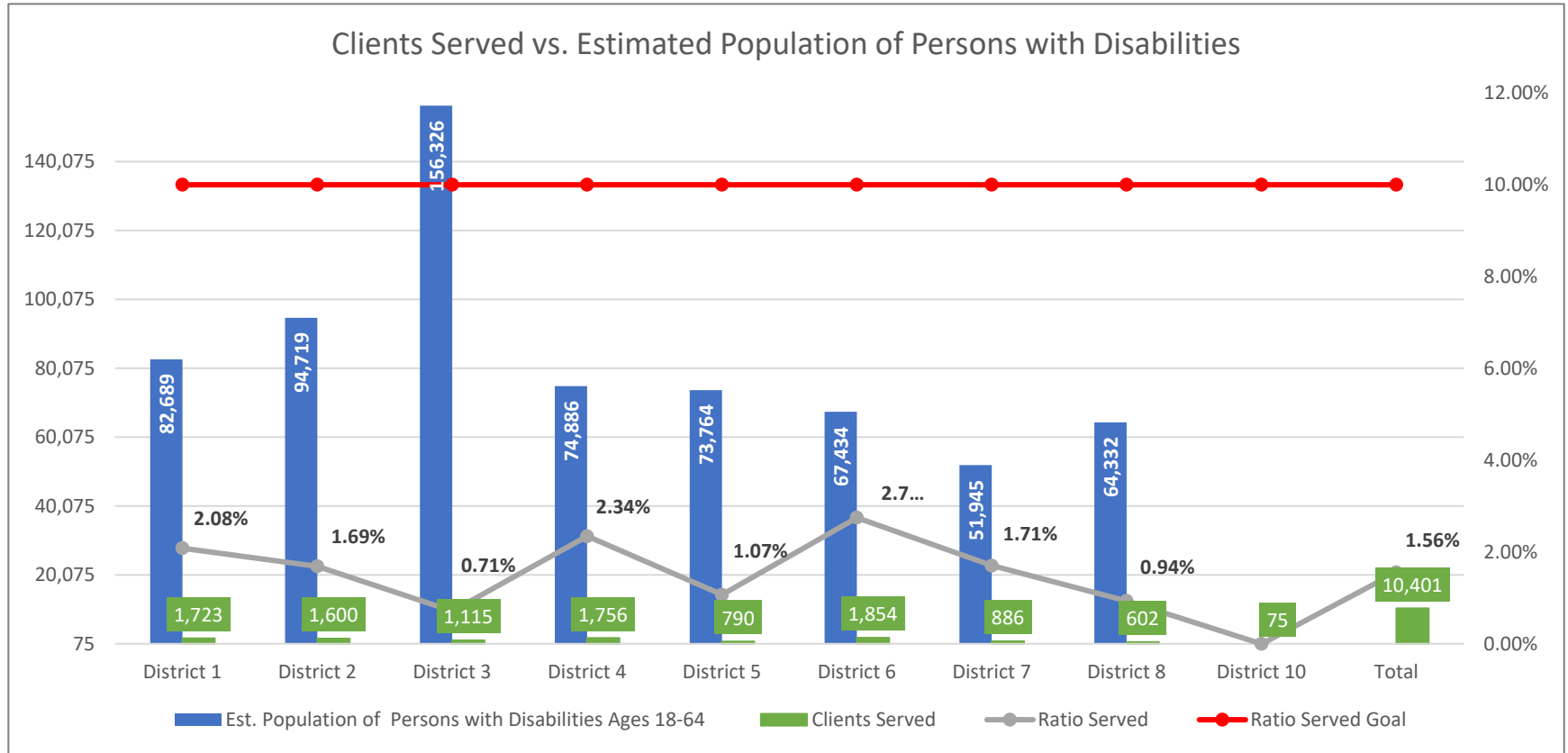
## **GVRS Board Meeting**

Jennifer Howell, Client Services Director

[Jennifer.Howell@gvs.ga.gov](mailto:Jennifer.Howell@gvs.ga.gov)



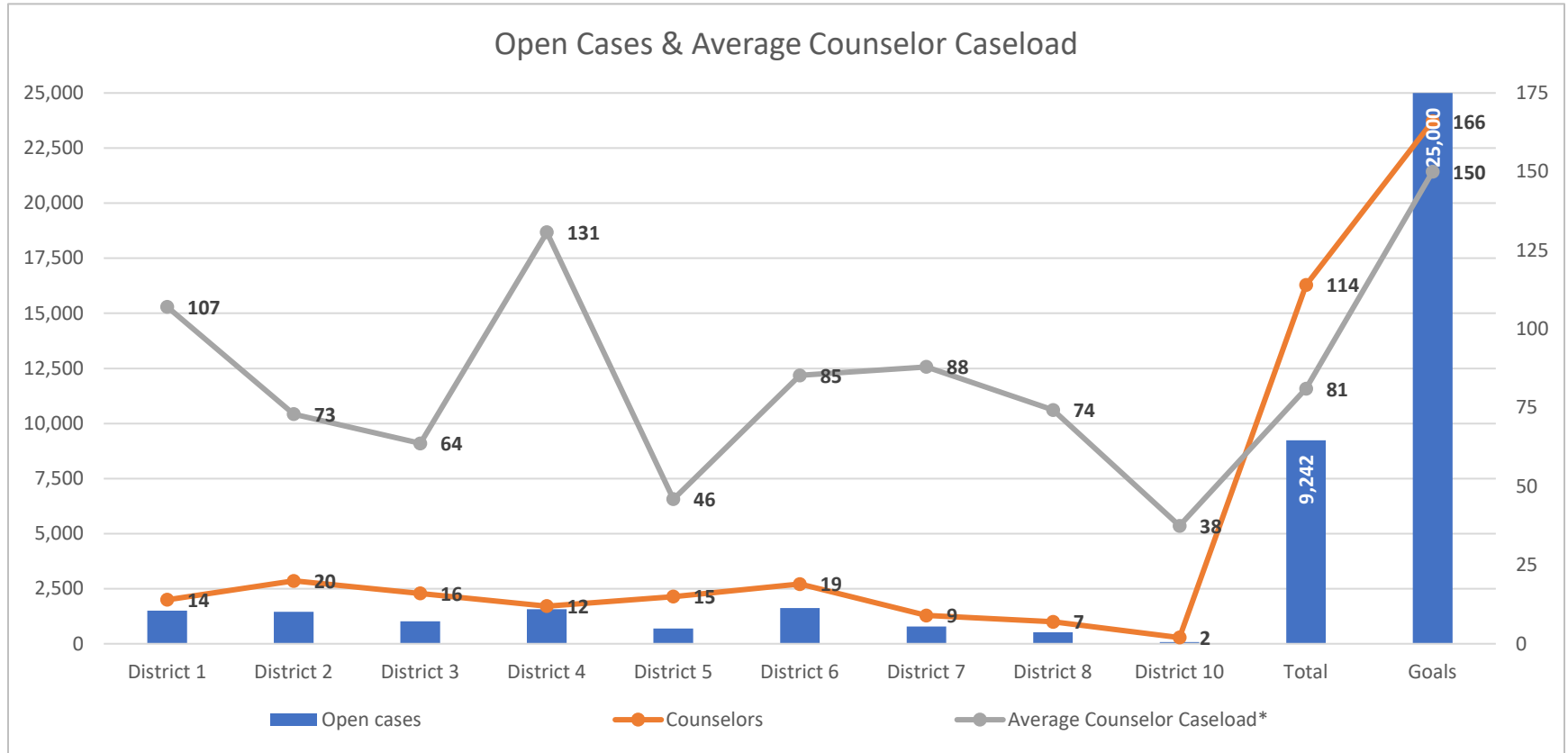
# GVRA Clients Served (18-64yo)



*\*Data as of 12/12/2023*



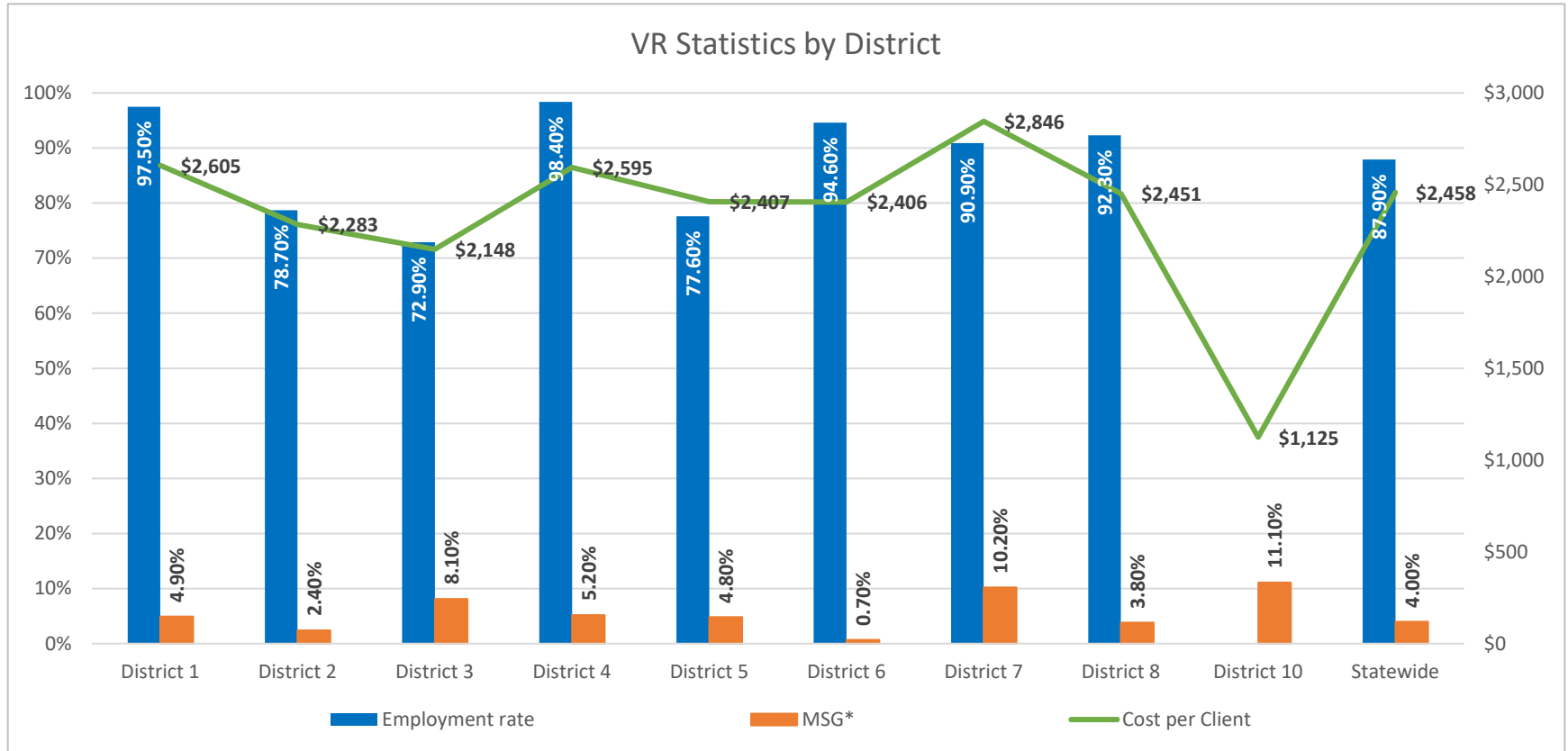
# GVRA Clients Served (18-64yo)



*\*Data as of 12/12/2023*



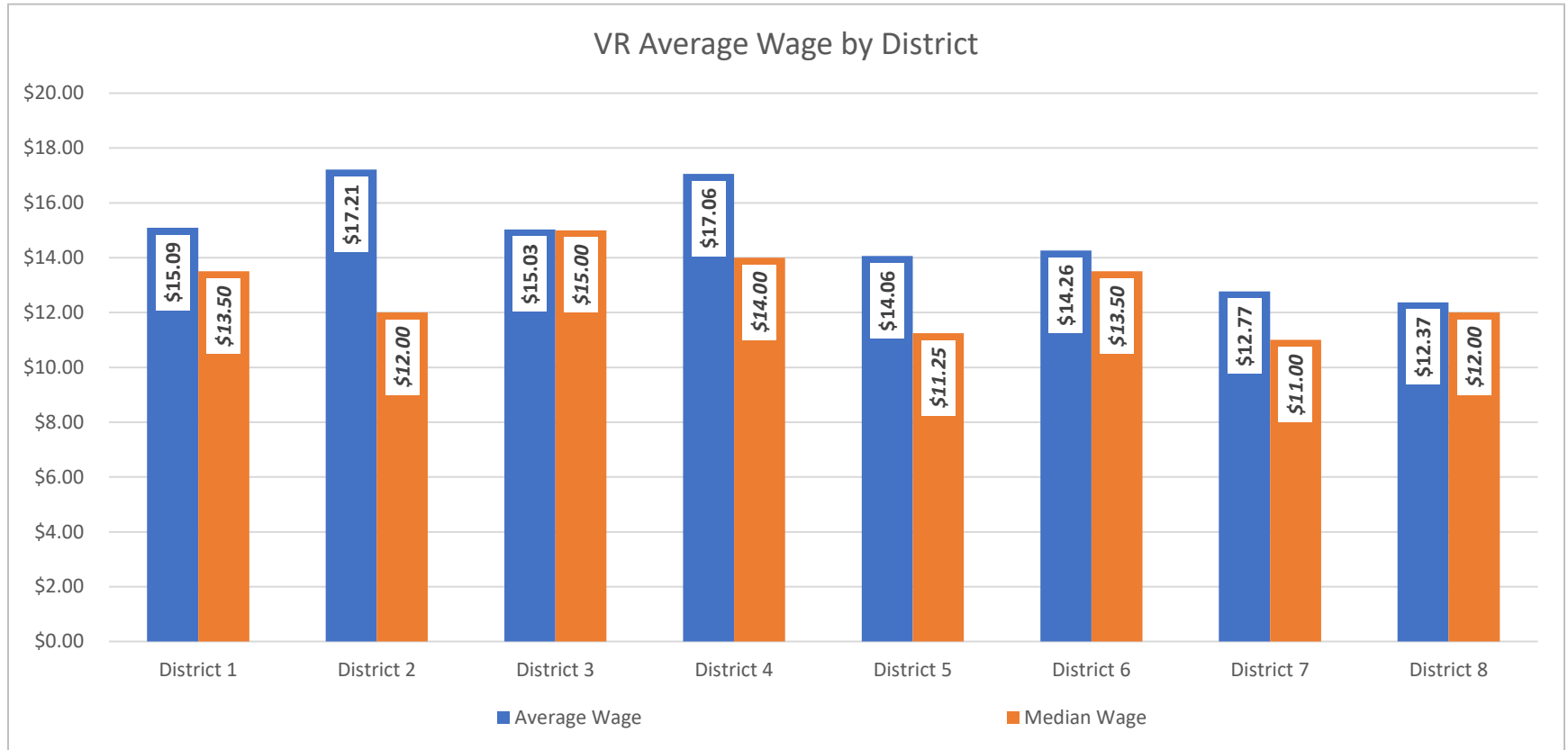
# GVRA Statistics by District



*\*Data as of 12/12/2023*



# GVRA Statistics by District



*\*Data as of 12/12/2023*



# Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency

January 10, 2024

## **GVRS Board Meeting**

Rita McWhorter, DAS Program Director

[Rita.McWhorter@ssa.gov](mailto:Rita.McWhorter@ssa.gov)



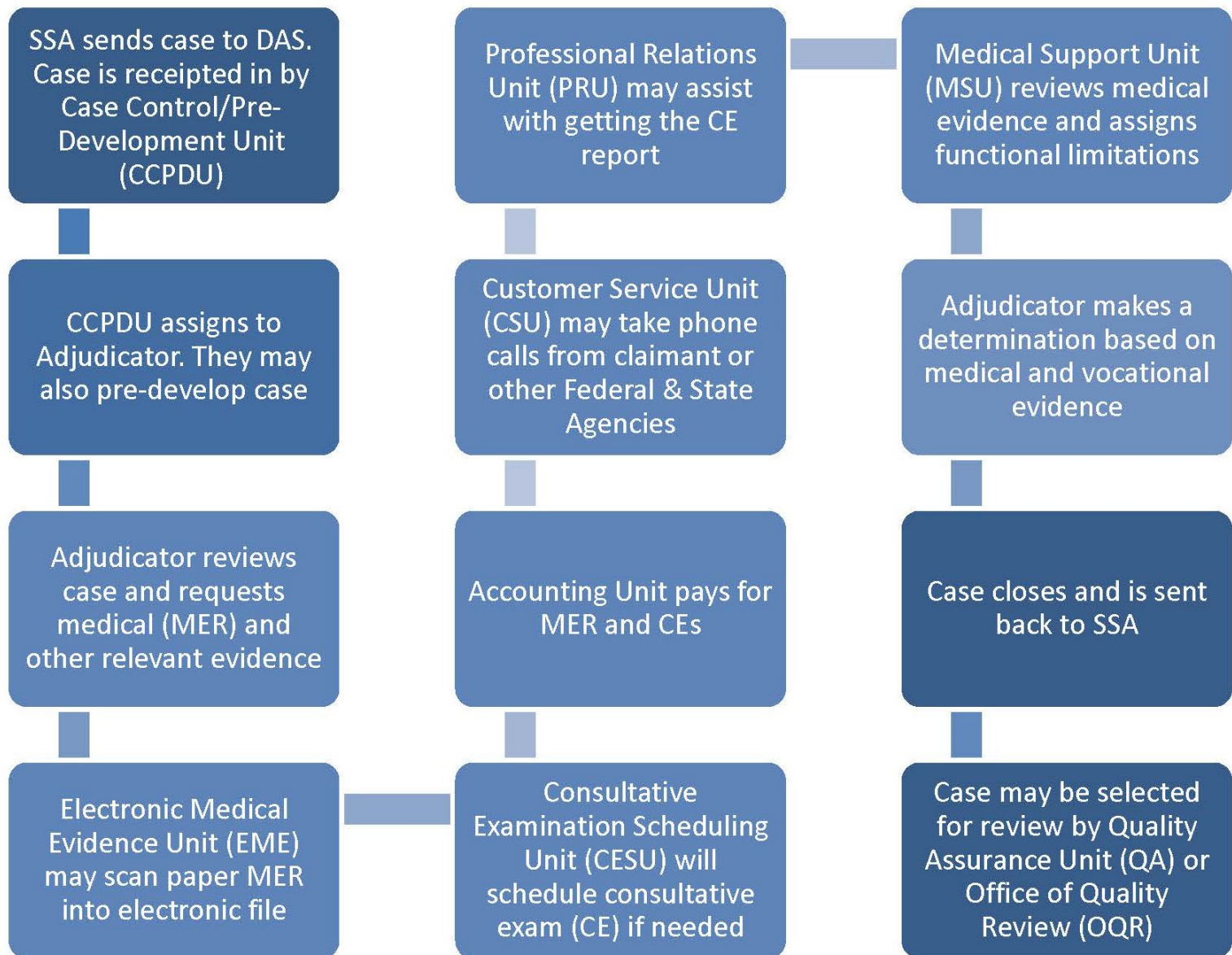
# DAS: The Disability Claims Process

- ❖ The SSA Field Office determines if the applicant meets the non-disability criteria for benefits (i.e., age, work credits, performance of substantial gainful activity (SGA), and relationship to the insured worker).
- ❖ The claim is transmitted to DAS electronically and/or the paper file is mailed to one of our offices (Athens, Dalton, Savannah, Stone Mountain, Thomasville) for the medical determination portion of the process.
- ❖ Once assigned to an Adjudicator, the claimant is contacted and the necessary medical and vocational evidence of record (MERs) from treating sources are obtained to make a medical determination. If the evidence is insufficient to make a determination, the claimant is sent to an independent Provider for a one-time consultative examination (CE).
  - Note: DAS determination is a recommendation - not a final decision.
- ❖ Once the DAS portion is completed, the claim is returned to the SSA Field Office. At this point, any further communication or inquiries from the claimant should be directed to the servicing SSA Field Office.
  - If approved, the claimant receives an approval letter which includes the amount of the monthly benefit and the effective date.
  - If not approved, the claimant may pursue the next level of appeal.





# How a Case Moves through DAS



# State Responsibilities

- ❖ Budget
  - ❖ GVRA must submit annual and quarterly spending plans (Projected Budgets)
  - ❖ GVRA must Monthly Report of Obligations/Expenditures
  - ❖ GVRA cannot generate budget capacity to assist with hires with the approved budget
  
- ❖ Human Resources
  - ❖ GVRA can only recruit and hire DDS Staff when approved at the federal level (solely based on SSA hiring authority)
  - ❖ GVRA cannot backfill positions that may become vacant even if hires are allowed
  - ❖ GVRA employees must pass a separate background check
  - ❖ GVRA can recruit providers to perform exams
  - ❖ DAS staff are sometimes considered contractors, state employees, and federal employees
  
- ❖ IT and Facilities
  - ❖ GVRA can enter into facilities/lease agreements, but all locations must meet SSA requirements
  - ❖ *DAS employees have separate emails, IT Security requirements, and end-user computers and software*



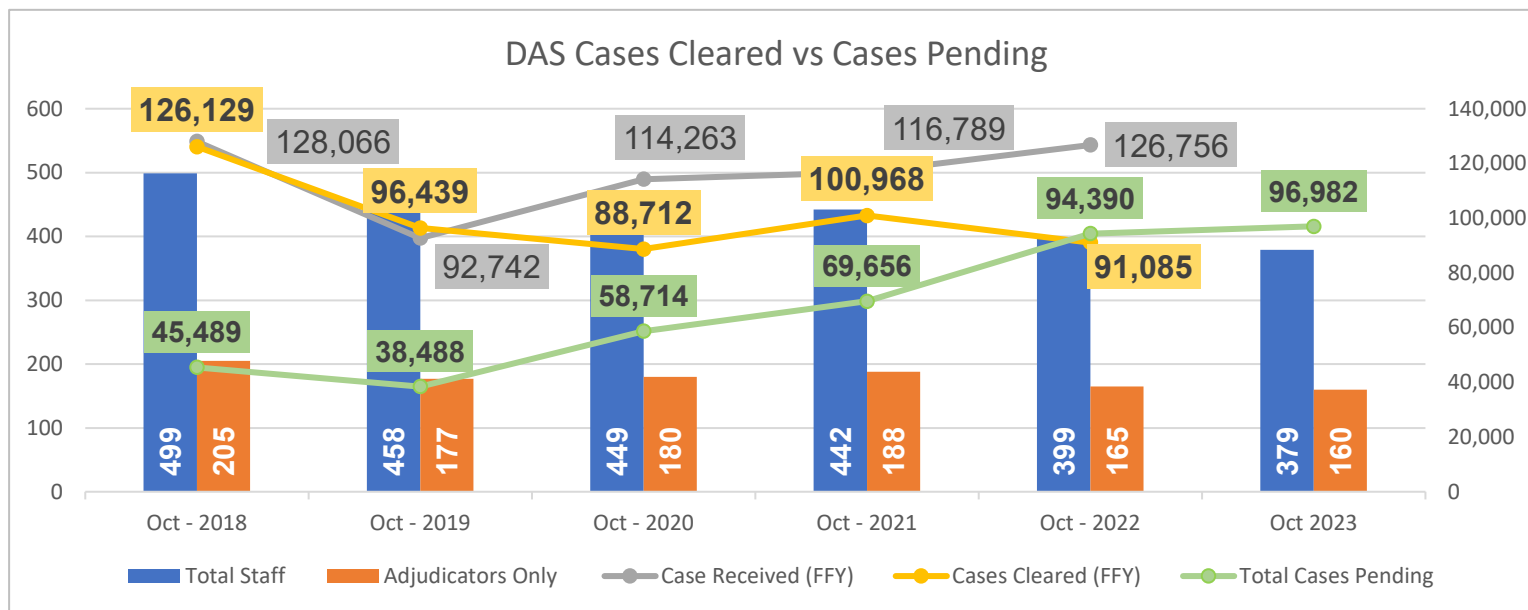
# Federal Responsibilities

- ❖ Claims Process
  - ❖ Claims must be filed with SSA
  - ❖ SSA can assign Georgia claims to other DDS entities
  
- ❖ Budget
  - ❖ SSA fully funds the program (100% funding of the DDS)
  - ❖ SSA establishes budget and spending priorities using state submission data
  - ❖ SSA determines budget bandwidth across all DDS entities using quarterly reports.
  
- ❖ Human Resources
  - ❖ Training Materials/Resources
  - ❖ SSA maintains all hiring oversight and establishes the number of hires without backfills due to attrition
  - ❖ Workload assistance from state and federal components
  - ❖ SSA monitors workload progress and accuracy rates
  
- ❖ IT and Facilities
  - ❖ SSA manages a national case management system
  - ❖ SSA maintains all equipment (laptops, printers, cell phones, etc.)
  - ❖ SSA maintains all DDS Security oversight via Security Reviews/Audits
  - ❖ SSA maintains the mailing system and auto-generated messages
  - ❖ SSA must approve location facilities



# Challenges

- ❖ Continuing Resolution (CR)
  - ❖ Lack of funding, overtime, and hiring allocation
- ❖ Retention and recruitment
  - ❖ Staff losses to SSA and the VA
  - ❖ Basic Training requires up to 16 weeks; however, it takes up to 2 years for an Adjudicator to completely learn the job and work independently
- ❖ Case backlogs and increased processing times
- ❖ Lack of Providers in rural areas to conduct Consultative Exams



\*Total processing time for Georgia in FY2018 was 141.2 days. At the end of FFY2023, it was 300.5 days. Cases Received and Cases Cleared are TBD for FY2024.

# Highlights

- ❖ FFY-to-Date Clearances – 23,382
- ❖ 3-month rolling quarter accuracy – 98.9%
  - *Above the Region and Nation (95.7%)*
- ❖ Retention and Recruitment
  - Hires – 67 hired in FFY23
  - Increased salaries
  - Increased telework opportunities
  - Case assignment breaks
  - Departmental and Agency contests and events
  - Exploring more locations with VR to recruit positions outside metro-Atlanta

# Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency

January 10, 2024

## **GVRS Board Meeting**

Tom Wilson, Board Chairman



# New Business/Old Business

- ❖ Reminder to Complete Required Annual Financial Disclosure Report with State Ethics Commission by January 31, 2024
- ❖ 2024 GVRS Board Meeting Dates
- ❖ 2024 GVRS Board Officer Election Dates



**GEORGIA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES  
REGULARLY SCHEDULED BOARD  
MEETING DATES FOR 2024**

*All meetings will begin at 1:00 p.m.*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Location</b>
January 10, 2024	Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency 200 Piedmont Avenue SE, West Tower – 13 <sup>th</sup> Floor Atlanta, Georgia 30334
March 13, 2024	University of Georgia Center for Continuing Education 1197 S Lumpkin Street Athens, Georgia 30602
May 8, 2024	Virtual – Board Elections
August 14, 2024	Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute 6135 Roosevelt Highway Warm Springs, Georgia 31830
October 9, 2024	Georgia National Fairgrounds & Agriculture Center 401 Golden Isles Parkway Perry, Georgia 31069



# Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency

January 10, 2024

## **GVRS Board Meeting**

Tom Wilson, Board Chairman

## **Public Comments & Adjournment**

