



NEWS RELEASE

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2022 DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AND INCLUSION AWARDS

Photos of the winners are available at:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1BdxDdoi07ypIw13KUSx-60dZoatzAokJ?usp=sharing>

Five Nebraska VR partners receive awards for their role in creating inclusive workplaces and advocacy for disability employment.

The 2022 Disability Employment and Inclusion Awards highlight the successful partnership between Nebraska VR and the businesses and communities they serve. Nebraska VR offers individualized programs to help people with disabilities find employment consistent with their interests, priorities, strengths, talents, and choices while working with businesses to find and keep quality employees.

Nebraska Department of Education Deputy Commissioner Dr. Deborah Frison commended those receiving the award. "Recognizing individuals and businesses who have adopted inclusive hiring practices to build successful and thriving Nebraska workplaces is important," said Dr. Frison. "Their efforts to ensure their workforce reflects their communities is a model for others. This leadership helps all Nebraskans have access to learning, earning, and living." Dr. Frison also recognized Nebraska VR staff members who provide employment services to clients and businesses as well as those who work with students in each Nebraska high school.

"We are pleased to recognize an entrepreneur, a Champion of Disability Employment, and three businesses during October's National Disability Employment Awareness Month. All the awardees exemplify this year's theme 'Disability: Part of the Equity Equation'," Nebraska VR Director Lindy Foley noted. "This event underscores the potential of our work together to provide full access to employment and community for individuals with disabilities while meeting the hiring needs of Nebraska businesses. The recognition they are receiving today is well deserved."

The Nebraska State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) selected the recipients from nominees submitted by Nebraska VR Business Account Managers and Employment Specialists.

The award winners are:

Entrepreneur Award – Donato Medina, Medina's Carriers LLC, Grand Island, NE

Donato Medina's work ethic and ability to think creatively worked in his favor in the trucking industry as the owner of Medina's Carriers LLC in Grand Island, Nebraska. After experiencing a back and shoulder injury in a meat packing job, he

needed to rethink what he did for work. He knew he would need to make a vocational change to accommodate a 24-pound lifting limit and began working with Nebraska VR Employment Specialist Felipe Cruz and Self-Employment Statewide Coordinator Julie Shively to conduct a feasibility study and create a business plan. The self-employment services he received supported the incorporation of his strengths, skills, and abilities while ensuring his self-employment business idea was financially feasible and sustainable over the long term. Donato's business, which launched in 2017, transports palletized items, grain, fertilizer, and cold storage items such as chicken and beef along the I-80 corridor in Central Nebraska. He has far exceeded the initial financial projections which he attributes to his business philosophy, "Do the right thing and the money will come." His commitment to safety, treating drivers fairly, adapting to the challenges of the pandemic through technology, and building a good business reputation have all contributed to his success.

New Business Partner Recognition Award – Best Western Plus North Platte Inn & Suites, North Platte, NE

Best Western Plus North Platte Inn & Suites General Manager Beth Hoskins and Executive Housekeeping Director Cora Skufca began partnering with Nebraska VR in March 2022. They began hosting business tours, mock interviews, job shadows, on-the-job evaluations, and provided disability awareness training to their entire staff to support their commitment to fostering an inclusive workplace. Both provided performance reviews, feedback to Nebraska VR staff members, and were great communicators while finding opportunities and strategies for clients to improve and succeed. As a result of these experiences, they have filled a vacant position with one of the client participants.

Small Business Partner Recognition Award – KLM Products Group/Candy Barn Express, Scottsbluff, NE

KLM Products Group/Candy Barn Express distributes products and candy sold online from their Scottsbluff, NE location. As one of the fastest growing candy distributors in the United States, they are adding a second shift and want to continue to provide opportunities for individuals with disabilities. In the past year through hosting both on-the-job exploration and supported employment experiences, they were able to meet job candidates and ensure the job duties were a good fit which resulted in two hires. Owner Patrick Maag appreciates the loyal reliable employees the business has hired and considers their contribution to the company as a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Large Business Partner Recognition Award – Mutual of Omaha, Omaha, NE

Mutual of Omaha, based in Omaha, NE, provides an array of insurance and financial services to individuals, businesses, and groups throughout the United States. They have 5300 employees housed in 103 locations nationwide. Over their years of partnering, they have hosted informational interviews, business tours, on-the-job evaluations, job shadows, internships, and other worksite experiences. Mutual of Omaha meets with Nebraska VR bi-monthly for updates, to review resumes, share job title essential functions, and participate in Employee Resource Group discussions. Since the pandemic they have used virtual formats to include presenting to Nebraska VR Pre-Employment Transition Services staff who work with students to share information about various employment opportunities and internship programs. The company has been recognized by Forbes magazine for their Disability, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts as one of the Best Employers for Diversity in 2022. They are committed to recruiting, retaining, and empowering employees to be their best at work, home, and in the community while celebrating the talents and attributes of all their associates.

Champion of Disability Employment Recognition Award – Jon Lierman, Wayne, NE

In his food service manager role, Jon Lierman has partnered with Nebraska VR for the last five years. He has welcomed opportunities to host work-based learning experiences for students like job shadows, on-the-job evaluations, and business tours. He has organized meaningful activities like food preparation and packaging, dining room and kitchen cleaning as well as unloading a supply truck. Jon makes an effort to connect with the students one-on-one as they learn work expectations and goes the extra mile to ensure clients feel part of the team by providing name tags, uniforms, and hats. Through his work to provide students and adults with hands-on training, he has also contributed to the successful employment of many clients at his Pizza Hut location and other businesses. In addition, he is a Unified Helper with the Special Olympics.

Nebraska VR is an office of the Nebraska Department of Education.

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