



NEWS RELEASE

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2023 Disability Employment and Inclusion Awards

Photos of the winners are available at:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1qcostEF3AhSciYmkXNIhD3m_Vfula6kg?usp=sharing

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

The 2023 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.

"It is extraordinary for businesses in these Nebraska communities to participate in opportunities where Nebraskans of all abilities can have access to meaningful work," said Nebraska Governor Jim Pillen at the event. "With a 2% unemployment rate, businesses are smart to look for qualified job candidates through the Nebraska VR program."

Nebraska Commissioner of Education Dr. Brian Maher also commended those receiving the award. "Recognizing individuals and employers who have embraced inclusion to build successful Nebraska workplaces is a celebration of leadership," said Dr. Maher. "These partnerships help individuals with disabilities have meaningful employment and are a model for others in support of the preparation of all Nebraskans for learning, earning, and living." He also recognized Nebraska VR staff members who provide services to students, clients, and businesses.

"We are pleased to recognize one of our successful self-employment entrepreneurs and four of our business partners during October's National Disability Employment Awareness Month. All the awardees exemplify this year's theme 'Advancing Access & Equity,'" said Nebraska VR Director Lindy Foley. "The recognition they are receiving for providing access and opportunity 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 awards are presented during October's National Disability Employment Awareness Month. The Council is comprised of individuals who have an interest in working with Nebraska VR to ensure the needs of Nebraskans who experience a disability are met in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

Entrepreneur Award – Josh Beck, Countryside Gunsmithing LLC, Lincoln, NE

Josh Beck wanted to supplement his family's income and fill a niche in the market where he could balance the needs of his family and his teaching position at Southeast Community College – Milford. Since 2021, he has operated his business, Countryside Gunsmithing LLC, in Lincoln during the summer, on nights and weekends, and during school breaks throughout the academic year. As a United States Marine Armorer who served in five countries, he received training and certification in repairing firearms but shattered his knee in the line of duty. Because his injuries made it difficult and painful to stand for long periods of time, Nebraska VR Self-Employment Statewide Coordinator Julie Shively planned a consultation with Nebraska Assistive Technology Specialist David Altman to understand his workspace. With a small investment in anti-fatigue mats and technology combined with his skills and commitment to quality service, he has become a popular and trusted craftsman. He has exceeded his business plan's net income goal by 32%. Josh's long-term goal is to operate Countryside Gunsmithing LLC as a full-time venture.

New Business Partner Recognition Award – CVS Health, Lincoln, NE

CVS Health is a well-known nationwide business with a commitment to support inclusive work environments. Three Lincoln area locations are no exception to this commitment as they have been generous hosts of work-based learning experiences, worksite tours, on-the-job training experiences, and job shadows. Local Store Manager Steve Andrews has welcomed students and adult clients by providing opportunities to explore both retail and pharmacy tech positions. The collaboration has also included presentations from corporate CVS Workforce Initiative Managers Melanie Kramer and Marques Hancock with Nebraska VR staff about their inclusive initiatives and tips for supporting clients in applying, completing the required questionnaire, and interviewing for available positions. Both local and corporate managers are known to provide individualized support when needed and have consistently been open to discovering new ways to grow the partnership.

New Business Partner Recognition Award – Pioneer Animal Clinic, Scottsbluff, NE

Pioneer Animal Clinic began their partnership by hosting business tours for students interested in working in the veterinary field. They continued to partner by providing students and adult clients with work-based learning experiences, conducting mock job interviews, and participating in the Business Meet and Greet at ESU 13's Annual Job Expo. Since the first contact with Office Manager Elsa Hazlitt, the clinic has embraced developing a working relationship to provide a positive environment and great communication where students and job seekers gain valuable experience.

Small Business Partner Recognition Award – Alliance Grocery Kart, Alliance, NE

The Alliance Grocery Kart is a full-service grocery store serving Alliance, NE and is a staple in the surrounding communities. The location has 48 full and part-time employees and welcomes providing opportunities for Nebraska VR clients and students to learn about working in the grocery and retail field. Manager and Co-Owner Becky Maser values inclusion and works to ensure both students and clients have the support they need to have a successful on-the-job training or work-based learning experience.

Large Business Partner Recognition Award – Nebraska Department of Transportation, Lincoln, NE

The Nebraska Department of Transportation (NDOT) has partnered with Nebraska VR since 2017 hosting on-the-job evaluations and work-based learning experiences, however the partnership has grown exponentially over the past year into a true collaboration. Talent Acquisition Manager Todd Ludwig, Highway Accident Records Supervisor Carole Gasper, and others at NDOT work to provide opportunities for all abilities and backgrounds for adults and students. As active members of EmployLNK meetings, they are known as great communicators with a full understanding of skill assessments and accommodations in discussions regarding job openings and applicants. Going forward, they will begin hosting monthly lunch and learn events with NDOT supervisors where Nebraska VR Business Account Managers provide disability awareness activity modules known as Windmills Training. They have referred current staff members who needed accommodations to continue to be successful employees and have hired three Nebraska VR clients from the Lincoln area in the past year.

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

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