Rural Youth Apprenticeship Development (RYAD) Project: How Four State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies Created the Infrastructure for Youth with Disabilities to Access Apprenticeship Programs

Introduction

The Rural Youth Apprenticeship Development (RYAD) Project was established to expand high-quality apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship opportunities for youth with disabilities (ages 16–21) in rural and underserved communities. Led by the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI), RYAD works to reduce rural-specific barriers, increase cross-agency partnerships, and build sustainable models that benefit both employers and young people.

Through cross-state collaboration, subject matter consultation, and applied learning, RYAD engaged four State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies (SVRAs)—Vermont Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI), Vermont HireAbility, Wyoming Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and Idaho Division of Vocational Rehabilitation— to foster increased knowledge, stronger partnerships, and clearer pathways for leveraging apprenticeships as a meaningful career strategy that aligns with local labor markets and the needs of rural youth.

The Learning Collaborative Model

A core component of RYAD was its structured Learning Collaborative (LC), which served as the project's engine for shared learning, peer exchange, and real-time problem solving. The LC model brought together interdisciplinary teams from each participating SVRA, including VR counselors, apprenticeship coordinators, business engagement staff, transition specialists, and agency leadership.

Key elements of the Learning Collaborative included:

- Monthly virtual LC meetings focused on targeted skill-building topics such as apprenticeship standards, intermediary models, youth engagement strategies, accessible program design, employer partnerships, and rural transportation solutions.
- Technical assistance from national subject matter experts in apprenticeships, disability employment, and rural workforce development.
- Structured cross-state dialogue enabling states to share progress, barriers, and creative solutions.
- A repository of tools, templates, policy guidance, and implementation artifacts to support replication.

- State-specific coaching calls to help VR teams advance local priorities.

Through the LC, agencies gained a shared vocabulary, clearer models for pre-apprenticeships, and a more sophisticated understanding of how apprenticeship can serve as a viable career pathway for rural youth with disabilities.

State Participation Overview

State VR Agency	Primary Focus	Key Outcomes
Vermont Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI)	Identify accessible and remote apprenticeship pathways for youth with blindness/low vision	Expanded capacity; strengthened partnerships; redesigned LEAP model
Vermont HireAbility	Build statewide apprenticeship infrastructure and expand earn-and-learn options	Industrial Sewing RA developed; increased staff skills; deeper partnerships
Wyoming DVR	Create foundational pre-apprenticeship pathways aligned with rural workforce needs	Construction pre-apprenticeship developed; statewide expansion model established
Idaho DVR	Develop new pre-apprenticeship models in sectors aligned with rural labor markets	Forestry pre-apprenticeship designed for implementation

State Profiles and Outcomes

Vermont Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI)

DBVI joined RYAD project aiming to expand career pathways for youth with blindness and visual the RYAD project aiming to expand career pathways for youth with blindness and visual impairments. Traditional trade-based apprenticeships were generally incompatible with the needs of BVI youth, prompting DBVI to explore remote, tech-based, and service-aligned pre-apprenticeship opportunities. Through extensive partner engagement—including the Vermont Department of Labor, apprenticeship office,

AmeriCorps, CTE centers, and national blind-specific training organizations—DBVI significantly expanded internal apprenticeship knowledge and identified promising models for adaptation. DBVI's sought to:

- Identify non-traditional and remote apprenticeship opportunities aligned with the strengths of BVI youth.
- • Expand the capacity of VR staff to engage employers in accessible apprenticeship discussions.
- • Strengthen and redesign the existing LEAP (Learn, Earn, and Prosper) program as a potential pre-apprenticeship model.

Activities and Achievements

DBVI conducted extensive exploration and partnership development, including:

- Consultation with the Vermont Department of Labor, apprenticeship office, and career and technical education (CTE) system.
- Outreach to national partners (NSITE, Blind Institute of Technology, Accessible Pharmacy) offering career pathways in IT, accounting, accessibility compliance, customer support, and digital services.
- Investigation of national accessibility apprenticeship pilots such as the Florida DBS accessibility apprenticeship.
- Collaboration with AmeriCorps to explore possible service-based pre-apprenticeships (ultimately determined incompatible due to in-person requirements).
- Delivery of presentations and resource sharing through statewide VR and CTE networks.

Challenges

- Vermont's limited apprenticeship catalog offered few options compatible with blindness or low vision.
- The small size of the agency reduced the feasibility of DBVI becoming an apprenticeship sponsor.
- Rural geography and transportation constraints made remote or hybrid options essential—but such models largely do not yet exist.
- Turnover within the state apprenticeship office slowed progress.

Outcome

Although no apprenticeships were launched during RYAD, DBVI significantly increased its internal capacity and strengthened cross-agency partnerships. Staff reported greater confidence engaging employers, improved understanding of apprenticeship structures, and new tools for supporting youth interested in technical fields. DBVI also built a roadmap for transforming LEAP into a more formalized pre-apprenticeship model in the future.

Vermont HireAbility

HireAbility participated in RYAD while simultaneously implementing the Vermont Career Advancement Project (VCAP), a major statewide RSA-funded initiative focused on expanding earn-and-learn pathways. HireAbility leveraged its existing Vermont Career Advancement Project (VCAP) to expand apprenticeship pathways for youth with disabilities. The agency trained Career Pathway Navigators, strengthened partnerships with education and workforce entities, and developed a Registered Industrial Sewing Apprenticeship with Fourbital. HireAbility also implemented new career-exploration activities and pop-up job fairs, increasing exposure to apprenticeship pathways for rural youth. HireAbility sought to:

- Establish statewide infrastructure to support equitable access to apprenticeships for youth.
- Expand apprenticeship opportunities in targeted sectors, including IT, healthcare, financial services, advanced manufacturing, and construction.
- Equip VR counselors and business representatives with the skills needed to engage employers and support individuals in apprenticeship pathways.

Activities and Achievements

- Hired and trained Career Pathway Navigators specializing in credentialed career pathways.
- Delivered statewide apprenticeship training for VR counselors and business account managers.
- Developed a Registered Apprenticeship Training Guide clarifying roles of VR, employers, schools, and state apprenticeship entities.
- Co-developed an Industrial Sewing Apprenticeship with employer partner Fourbital.
- Conducted pop-up job fairs and apprenticeship-focused events in rural high schools.
- Strengthened coordination with CTE centers, the Department of Labor, and community colleges.

Challenges

- Small employers dominate Vermont's economy, increasing the burden of apprenticeship sponsorship.
- Many rural youth lacked familiarity with apprenticeships or long-term career pathway concepts.
- Apprenticeship opportunities did not always align with participant interests or geographic constraints.

- Leadership turnover in the state apprenticeship office hindered multi-year planning.

Outcome
HireAbility substantially expanded its internal apprenticeship infrastructure and partnerships. While few rural youth entered registered apprenticeships during the project period, the agency is now positioned to build on newly passed apprenticeship legislation and expand on-ramps to high-quality employment for youth with disabilities.

Wyoming Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR)

Wyoming DVR recognized the need to develop new options for youth as traditional rural industries—coal, oil, and gas—declined. DVR sought to create strong pre-apprenticeship pathways grounded in foundational competencies and aligned with employer needs. DVR focused on creating pre-apprenticeship opportunities aligned with shifting economic conditions in the state. In partnership with the University of Wyoming Innovation Wyrkshop, DVR developed a rigorous Construction Pre-Apprenticeship pathway emphasizing foundational math, soft skills, and hands-on learning. Despite staffing transitions, the agency successfully piloted the model and established a sustainable framework now replicated in other industries. WY DVR sought to

Activities and Achievements
- A pivotal relationship emerged with the University of Wyoming Innovation Wyrkshop, a statewide makerspace with rich resources for hands-on learning. Additional partners included:
- Identified industry skill gaps, particularly in basic math, communication, and workplace readiness.
- Developed a full pre-apprenticeship pathway combining:
    - Wyrkshop credential-based foundational learning
    - Soft-skills instruction from DVR
    - Employer input on industry expectations
    - Hands-on lab experiences and exposure activities
- Recruited an initial pilot cohort of students.

Challenges
• Four staffing transitions required restarting implementation efforts multiple times.
• The multi-step nature of pre-apprenticeship design required more time than anticipated.
• Student availability and competing academic demands affected completion rates.

Outcome
The Construction Pre-Apprenticeship model created through RYAD became a statewide blueprint, later adopted by the apprenticeship office to build a healthcare version. DVR

plans to integrate this model into its Disability Innovation Fund grant, ensuring long-term sustainability.

Idaho Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR)

Idaho DVR engaged in RYAD to address the scarcity of apprenticeship options in highly rural regions, particularly Preston, Idaho. Idaho DVR addressed the lack of structured pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs in rural communities such as Preston. By collaborating with local school districts, forestry industry councils, the Department of Labor, and local employers, DVR co-designed a Forestry Pre-Apprenticeship complete with classroom instruction, soft skills support, and technical training. While MOUs were not finalized in time for launch, Idaho DVR now has a fully developed model ready for implementation. DVR sought to design a system that:

- Created new career pathways for students not pursuing four-year degrees.
- Increased clarity around apprenticeships statewide.
- Built partnerships that could share costs and ensure sustainability.

Activities and Achievements

- Conducted dozens of employer outreach meetings across construction, healthcare, public works, food service, and forestry sectors.
- Worked closely with rural school districts and the Idaho Apprenticeship Coalition.
- Identified a strong cluster of forestry apprenticeships geographically aligned with an engaged rural district.
- Co-designed a Forestry Pre-Apprenticeship pathway that included:
    - Classroom instruction through the high school
    - Soft skills and VR coaching from Idaho DVR
    - Industry council–provided simulators and technical instruction
    - Employer-based job shadowing and work experiences
    - Potential expansion into community college–aligned apprenticeships

Challenges

MOUs among education, VR, and employers were not completed in time for full launch.
Rural employer and school alignment required extensive coordination.
Limited staff time and geographic distance slowed partnership development.

Outcome

The forestry pre-apprenticeship model is fully developed and awaiting final partner signatures for implementation. It now serves as a model for future rural industry-aligned pathways statewide.

Cross-State Impact and Lessons Learned

RYAD significantly improved the capacity of participating VR agencies to understand, design, and implement apprenticeship-based career pathways for youth with disabilities. Across states, VR staff reported increased confidence, stronger employer engagement strategies, and an enhanced ability to navigate apprenticeship systems. States also developed replicable models that can be scaled to additional rural communities.

Across all four states, RYAD produced lasting systemic impact:

- Increased apprenticeship literacy among VR staff statewide
- Improved collaboration across VR, education, workforce systems, and employers
- Strong, replicable pre-apprenticeship frameworks tailored to rural realities
- Expanded recognition of non-traditional and remote apprenticeships
- New state-level apprenticeship policies supporting accessibility and equity
- Elevated expectations for youth with disabilities in rural workforce development

While the number of youth placed directly into apprenticeships during the project period was limited, the foundational infrastructure created through RYAD will support long-term expansion, replication, and innovation.

Conclusion

Through the Learning Collaborative model, targeted technical assistance, and strong cross-state partnerships, the RYAD project laid the foundation for expanding rural apprenticeship opportunities nationwide. While direct apprenticeship placements were limited during the grant period, states built sustainable structures and partnerships that will continue advancing apprenticeship access for youth with disabilities.

Funding Acknowledgment: The RYAD Project is funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant #90DPK00006-01-00).