

The Advocacy Ridge








presents

Employment and Adult Transition

Vocational Rehabilitation and Community Supports

VR Services, Pre-Employment Transition, Supported Employment, Independent Living, and Centers for Independent Living

Color-coded boxes tell you what is the same everywhere and what varies by state:

-  FEDERAL LAW — same in all 50 states
-  STATE VARIATIONS — laws differ; check your state
-  STRONGER STATE PROTECTIONS — some states give you more
-  ADVOCACY TIP — practical advice for parents
-  WATCH OUT — common pitfalls and risks
-  IMPORTANT NOTE — context and clarifications
-  STRATEGY — tactical guidance for due process

IMPORTANT NOTE

- When a child with a disability approaches adulthood, families face a wave of new questions: Will my child ever work? What happens when school ends? Who will support them in the community? This guide covers the main systems that exist to support employment, independence, and community participation for adults with disabilities.
- These programs are often underused — either families don't know they exist, or they wait until the last minute to access them. The most important message here is: start early. Many of these programs should be explored or accessed while your child is still in school rather than waiting until graduation or exit from special education services.
- This guide focuses on Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), supported employment, and Centers for Independent Living. For school-based transition services in the IEP, see our separate Postsecondary Transition guide.

1. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) — The Gateway to Adult Employment Supports

Every state has a Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency — a state-run program funded jointly by the federal government and the state — that provides employment-related services to people with disabilities. VR is one of the most powerful and most underused programs available to transition-age youth and adults with disabilities.

VR is not just for people who are already job-ready. It is for people who need support to become job-ready — including school, training, assessments, equipment, and job coaching.

FEDERAL LAW — Applies in ALL 50 States (Rehabilitation Act of 1973 | WIOA | 34 C.F.R. Part 361)

- VR is authorized under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and strengthened by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014.
- Who qualifies: Anyone with a physical or mental disability that is a substantial barrier to employment — and who can benefit from VR services.
- VR is free to eligible individuals. Some services may be co-paid based on financial need, but many are provided at no cost.
- What VR can provide: Career counseling and assessment, vocational training, college tuition and textbooks in some cases, job placement and job coaching, supported employment, transportation assistance for work, assistive technology for employment, rehabilitation engineering, and more.
- Apply for VR through your state VR agency — in-person, by phone, or online. A counselor will be assigned to work with you and develop an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) outlining the services you will receive.

ADVOCACY TIP

- Apply for VR while still in high school — ideally by 9th or 10th grade. Do not wait until graduation. VR and the school's transition IEP should be coordinated, and some services (like job exploration and work-based learning) work best while the student is still in school.
- VR can pay for college: In some states, for individuals with significant disabilities, VR can fund tuition, fees, and books at a two-year or four-year college as part of a vocational plan. This is one of the most underused VR benefits. Ask your VR counselor specifically about this.
- If your state has an 'Order of Selection' (meaning VR can't serve everyone and prioritizes the most significantly disabled individuals), ask specifically about Pre-ETS — Pre-Employment Transition Services are available to ALL students with disabilities, regardless of Order of Selection status. See Section 2.

Find Your State's VR Agency

STATE VARIATIONS — Laws Differ by State

- Alabama: Alabama DVR — rehab.alabama.gov
- Alaska: Alaska DVR — labor.alaska.gov/dvr
- Arizona: Arizona DES Vocational Rehabilitation — des.az.gov/vr
- Arkansas: Arkansas RSPV — ace.arkansas.gov/vr
- California: Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) — dor.ca.gov
- Colorado: Division of Vocational Rehabilitation — cdhs.colorado.gov/dvr
- Connecticut: Connecticut BRS (Bureau of Rehabilitation Services) — portal.ct.gov/agd
- Delaware: Delaware DVR — delawareworks.com/dvr
- Florida: Division of Vocational Rehabilitation — rehabworks.org
- Georgia: Georgia VR — gvs.georgia.gov
- Hawaii: Hawaii DVR — labor.hawaii.gov/dvr
- Idaho: Idaho DVR — vr.idaho.gov
- Illinois: Illinois DHS Division of Rehabilitation Services — dhs.state.il.us/vr
- Indiana: Indiana VR — in.gov/fssa/vr
- Iowa: Iowa VR — ivrs.iowa.gov
- Kansas: Kansas VR — dcf.ks.gov/vr
- Kentucky: Kentucky OVR — chfs.ky.gov/vr
- Louisiana: Louisiana LRSS — lcid.la.gov
- Maine: Maine DVR — maine.gov/rehab
- Maryland: Maryland DORS — dors.maryland.gov
- Massachusetts: Massachusetts MRC — mass.gov/mrc
- Michigan: Michigan LARA DVR — michigan.gov/leo/dvr
- Minnesota: Minnesota DVR — mn.gov/deed/dvr
- Mississippi: Mississippi MDRS — mdrs.ms.gov
- Missouri: Missouri VR — vr.dese.mo.gov
- Montana: Montana DLI/DVR — dli.mt.gov/vr
- Nebraska: Nebraska VR — vr.nebraska.gov

- Nevada: Nevada Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation — detr.nv.gov/vr
- New Hampshire: NH VR — nhvr.gov
- New Jersey: NJ DVR — state.nj.us/humanservices/dvrs
- New Mexico: NM Division of Vocational Rehabilitation — dvr.state.nm.us
- New York: ACCES-VR (Adult Career and Continuing Education Services) — aces.nysed.gov/vr
- North Carolina: NC DVR — ncdhhs.gov/dvr
- North Dakota: ND DVR — nd.gov/dhs/dvr
- Ohio: Ohio OOD (Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities) — ood.ohio.gov
- Oklahoma: Oklahoma DRS — okdrs.gov
- Oregon: Oregon VR — oregon.gov/odhs/vr
- Pennsylvania: PA OVR — dli.pa.gov/ovr
- Rhode Island: Rhode Island ORS — ors.ri.gov
- South Carolina: SC VR — scvrd.net
- South Dakota: SD DLR/VR — dlr.sd.gov/vr
- Tennessee: Tennessee VR — tn.gov/humanservices/vr
- Texas: Texas Workforce Commission VR — twc.texas.gov/vr
- Utah: Utah State Office of Rehabilitation (USOR) — usor.utah.gov
- Vermont: Vermont DVR — vocrehab.vermont.gov
- Virginia: Virginia DARS — vadars.org
- Washington: Washington State DVR — dshs.wa.gov/dvr
- West Virginia: WV DVR — wvdvr.org
- Wisconsin: Wisconsin DVR — dwd.wisconsin.gov/dvr
- Wyoming: Wyoming DVR — wyomingworkforce.org/vr
- Federal directory of all VR agencies: rsa.ed.gov (Rehabilitation Services Administration)
- Agency names and websites occasionally change. If a link no longer works, search “[your state] vocational rehabilitation.”

2. Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) — Starting in High School

Pre-ETS is one of the most significant changes WIOA made to the VR system. It requires every state VR agency to set aside funding specifically to serve students with disabilities BEFORE they graduate — and the services are available even before the student applies for VR.

This means your child can receive employment exploration and preparation services starting as early as age 14, through their state VR agency, at no cost, often without needing full VR eligibility determination procedures.

Students with IEPs, Section 504 Plans, and other documented disabilities may qualify for Pre-ETS. An IEP is not required.

FEDERAL LAW — Applies in ALL 50 States (Rehabilitation Act of 1973 | WIOA | 34 C.F.R. Part 361)

- Pre-ETS must be provided by all state VR agencies to students ages 14-21 with disabilities — including students in public school, private school, homeschool, and alternative education programs.
- The five categories of Pre-ETS services: (1) Job exploration counseling — learning about different careers and what they require. (2) Work-based learning — internships, job shadows, volunteer work, and work experiences in real community settings. (3) Workplace readiness training — interviewing skills, workplace culture, communication, and time management. (4) Self-advocacy instruction — learning how to ask for accommodations, communicate needs, and speak up for yourself. (5) Counseling on postsecondary education — understanding college, vocational training, and other post-school options.
- Pre-ETS is funded separately from VR services. Even if your state VR agency has an Order of Selection and a waitlist for full VR services, Pre-ETS must still be provided to eligible students.
- Pre-ETS is delivered through the VR agency — not the school. Contact your state VR agency and ask to enroll your student in Pre-ETS. You do not need a full VR application.



ADVOCACY TIP

- Contact your state VR agency the year your child turns 14 and ask specifically about Pre-ETS enrollment. Many school IEP teams don't know about Pre-ETS or forget to mention it — the initiative is through VR, not the school.
- Students do not need an IEP to access VR services. Students with IEPs, Section 504 Plans, documented disabilities, and in some cases students with medical or clinical documentation of a disability may qualify. Eligibility is determined by the VR agency, not the school.
- Work-based learning experiences are often the most valuable Pre-ETS service. Real community job sites — even unpaid exploration — teach skills and reveal interests that no classroom can replicate.
- Pre-ETS self-advocacy training is valuable even for students who may not seek employment. Learning how to communicate their needs, understand their rights, and speak up for themselves has lifelong impact.
- Ask your VR counselor whether your student's school IEP transition plan and VR Pre-ETS plan are coordinated. They should be connected — your student shouldn't be doing duplicative activities in two separate systems.
- With parent/student consent, VR representatives may participate in transition planning meetings. Coordination between the school and VR can help prevent gaps in services and supports after graduation.



WATCH OUT

- VR services supplement school transition services. A school cannot shift its IDEA responsibilities to VR or reduce required transition services because VR is involved. The school remains responsible for providing all transition services required by the IEP while the student remains eligible for special education.

3. Supported Employment — Working With Support

Supported employment is a service that helps people with significant disabilities find and keep real jobs in their communities — alongside people without disabilities, earning at least minimum wage. It includes job development, job matching, and ongoing job coaching.

'Supported employment' is not a sheltered workshop or a segregated day program. It is real work, real wages, real community integration — with whatever level of support the person needs to succeed.

FEDERAL LAW — Applies in ALL 50 States (Rehabilitation Act of 1973 | WIOA | 34 C.F.R. Part 361)

- VR funds the initial supported employment services — job development, job matching, and the intensive start-up coaching period.
- After VR closes the case (typically after the person has been stably employed for 90 days), ongoing supported employment support is usually funded through the Medicaid HCBS waiver or other adult disability service systems, depending on the state— a paid job coach who continues to support the person as needed.
- Customized Employment: A specialized approach to supported employment where a job is specifically designed or customized around the individual's unique skills, interests, and contributions — rather than fitting the person into an existing job. This is the best approach for individuals with the most significant disabilities. Ask your VR counselor about Customized Employment.
- Employment First: Federal policy direction and most state policies state that competitive integrated employment should be the first and preferred outcome for people with disabilities of working age. If your state has an Employment First policy, use it to advocate for supported employment over segregated day programs.

ADVOCACY TIP

- If a VR counselor suggests a sheltered workshop or subminimum wage employment, ask specifically about Customized Employment and Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) options instead. Federal policy strongly favors CIE, and most states have Employment First policies.
- APSE (Association of People Supporting Employment First): apse.org — national organization promoting employment for people with disabilities. Has state chapter contacts and resources for families.
- Griffin-Hammis Associates: griffinhammis.com — national experts on Customized Employment and Discovery (the process for identifying employment themes for individuals with complex needs). Good resource for families and employment staff.
- VCU Work Support Initiative: workforceinclusion.vcu.edu — free training and resources on supported employment and employment first.

4. Centers for Independent Living (CILs) — Peer Support and Community Navigation

Centers for Independent Living are nonprofit organizations found in communities across the country that provide free services to people with disabilities. They are unique because they are run BY people with disabilities FOR people with disabilities — peer support is at the center of what they do.

CILs are not just for people with physical disabilities. They generally serve people with all types of disabilities, who want to live more independently in the community.

FEDERAL LAW — Applies in ALL 50 States (Rehabilitation Act of 1973 | WIOA | 34 C.F.R. Part 361)

- CILs are authorized under Title VII of the Rehabilitation Act (29 U.S.C. § 796). There are over 400 CILs across the country and every state has at least one.
- The five core services every CIL provides: (1) Information and referral — connecting people with resources, programs, and services in the community. (2) Independent living skills training — practical skills for daily living, money management, transportation, and communication. (3) Peer counseling — connecting people with disabilities to others with similar experiences who can share knowledge and support. (4) Individual and systems advocacy — helping individuals navigate denials, fight for their rights, and participate in advocacy. (5) Transition services — helping people move from nursing facilities or institutions back into the community, or transition from school to adult community life.
- CILs are free. All services are provided at no cost to people with disabilities.

ADVOCACY TIP

- Find the CIL nearest you:
ilru.org/programs/cil-net/cil-center-and-association-directory — ILRU (Independent Living Research Utilization) maintains the national directory.
- CILs are especially valuable for young adults who are navigating the transition from school to adult life. A CIL peer counselor who has lived the same transition is often more helpful than any professional.
- If your family member is in a nursing facility or institutional setting and wants to return to community living, contact your nearest CIL immediately. Nursing Home Transition is one of the core services CILs provide, and they can help navigate the process.
- CILs can also help adults with disabilities understand their rights under the ADA, find accessible housing, navigate public transportation, and connect with employment resources.

5. Employment and Benefits — Working Without Losing Everything

One of the most common fears families have is that if a person with a disability gets a job, they will lose their SSI and Medicaid benefits. This fear prevents many people from ever trying to work. The reality is more complicated — and more hopeful.

SSA has work incentive programs specifically designed to let people test working while keeping benefits (see our SSI and Medicaid guide for details). The key points:

- SSI does not end the moment someone earns income. It gradually reduces as earnings increase — but partial SSI continues until earnings are high enough that the person truly does not need it.
- 1619(b) Medicaid Protection: Even when SSI cash payments stop because of earnings, Medicaid can continue as long as the person still needs it and income is below the state threshold. This is critical — health coverage does not automatically end when SSI ends.
- Student Earned Income Exclusion: Students under 22 in school can earn up to \$2,290/month (2024) with no impact on SSI. This amount changes annually - verify current limits with SSA.
- Ticket to Work: Free SSA program that connects SSI/SSDI recipients with employment services without triggering immediate benefits review. choosework.ssa.gov
- ABLE accounts allow eligible individuals with disabilities to save and spend money for qualified disability expenses without jeopardizing SSI and Medicaid eligibility, subject to federal limits and requirements.

WATCH OUT

- Families should strongly consider consulting a WIPA counselor (Work Incentive Planning and Assistance) before starting employment. This free call will tell you exactly how the specific job and income will affect benefits — before any action is taken.
- WIPA counselors: choosework.ssa.gov | 1-866-968-7842 — free, SSA-funded, knowledgeable about your exact situation.

6. Additional Adult Community Supports

Section 8 Housing

The HUD Housing Choice Voucher program (Section 8) provides rental assistance that can be used by people with disabilities to rent in the community. Many housing authorities prioritize people with disabilities within certain voucher programs or preferences. Waitlists are long — apply now through your local Public Housing Authority. Find your PHA: hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv

Food Assistance (SNAP)

People who receive SSI may qualify for SNAP (food stamps) — and SSI households receive expedited processing. SNAP and SSI are applied for separately through your state's social services agency. SNAP can significantly increase household food purchasing power. Apply: fns.usda.gov/snap/apply

Protection and Advocacy (P&A) Organizations

Every state has a federally funded P&A organization that provides free legal advocacy for people with disabilities. P&As help with VR appeals, benefit denials, housing rights, workplace discrimination, abuse and neglect investigations, and more. Find your state's P&A: ndrn.org

Supported Decision-Making and Guardianship

Many families are told guardianship is the next step when a student turns 18. However, guardianship removes significant legal rights and should not be assumed to be necessary simply because a person has a disability.

Supported Decision-Making, powers of attorney, representative payees, healthcare proxies, and other less restrictive alternatives may provide needed support while preserving the individual's rights and independence.

Families should learn about all available options before pursuing guardianship.

7. Links

Resource	Where to Go
Find your state VR agency	rsa.ed.gov or search '[your state] vocational rehabilitation'
RSA federal VR directory	rsa.ed.gov
Find a Center for Independent Living	ilru.org/programs/cil-net/cil-center-and-association-directory
WIPA counselors (free work benefits help)	choosework.ssa.gov 1-866-968-7842
Ticket to Work (work without losing benefits)	choosework.ssa.gov
APSE — employment first advocacy	apse.org
Protection and Advocacy (free legal help)	ndrn.org
HUD Section 8 housing	hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv
SNAP (food assistance) — apply	fns.usda.gov/snap/apply
ADA National Network (workplace rights)	adata.org
Griffin-Hammis (Customized Employment)	griffinhammis.com
Employment First state policies	employmentfirst.org
Parent Training Centers (PTIs)	parentcenterhub.org
Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center	gwccre.org/wintac

Need Advocacy Support?

The Advocacy Ridge is brought to you by experienced non-attorney special education advocates who work with families across multiple states.

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This guide provides general educational information and does not constitute legal advice. Laws, regulations, agency policies, and funding availability may vary by state and may change over time. Families should verify current requirements with their state Vocational Rehabilitation agency and other applicable agencies. Federal law cited: Rehabilitation Act of 1973; Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA); 34 C.F.R. Part 361; 34 C.F.R. Part 397; Title VII Independent Living Programs; Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); Social Security Administration work incentive programs.. All laws subject to change.

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