

WELCOME TO OUR

Quarterly Newsletter

A NOTE FROM NITA
Chief Executive Officer
Nita Hobbs

I'm pleased to announce WVARF's new "CRP Reinvestment Policy."

WVARF's Board of Directors has set us all up for success by approving a new investment policy. WVARF is setting aside \$50,000 of our interest income from our investment account per fiscal year to pass on to our CRPs. The funds should be seen as a vehicle to reinvest in Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs). Budgetary line items for the spending of the investment funds can include but are not limited to awarding "sub-grants" to CRPs for WVARF approved program needs (e.g., supplies, equipment, software, staff or client training); WVARF sponsored CRP trainings; WVARF program needs that directly benefit CRPs (e.g., supplies, equipment, software, staff or client training, apprenticeship program costs). More information about applying for sub-grants will be communicated to the State Use CRP leader list serv.

What a great way to kick off the new fiscal year!

Nita Hobbs



CRP Accomplishment Spotlight

LeSage Natural Water, operated by Green Acres Regional Center in Lesage, WV, is no stranger to the very prestigious Berkeley Springs International Water Tasting competition. Having won medals in previous years as well, LeSage Natural Water won the silver medal in the Best Purified Drinking Water for 2024! In fact, the gold medal winner was located in the West Indies, so allow us to congratulate LeSage Natural Water for having the Best Purified Drinking Water in the United States!

LeSage Natural Water was one of over 100 entrants from five continents with waters sourced from twenty states, three Canadian provinces, Australia, West Indies, Greece, and Taiwan, just to name a few!

Best Purified Drinking Water – 2024

1st – Mountain Springs Spring Water, St Kitts & Nevis, West Indies

2nd – LeSage Natural Water, Lesage, WV

3rd – Norland Pure Premium Enhanced Water, Lincoln, NE

4th - Taifer Group 100% Deep Ocean Water, Hualien City, Taiwan

5th – Berkeley Club Beverages, “Ye Famed Springs” Berkeley Springs, WV

Congratulations LeSage Natural Water!

I-81 WELCOME CENTER

Special recognition goes out to the Developmental Center & Workshop and their dedicated associates that man the DOH Rest Area and Welcome Center in Marlowe! This rest area, which includes Bunker Hill on the opposite side of the interstate, located in the Eastern Panhandle, has the largest acreage and number of flower beds of any other rest area in the state. It's a feat to keep up with, but they do a great job. They have received numerous customer complements as seen below.

“We stopped at the 81 south mile 25 welcome center today on our way to Roanoke VA..... I have been up and down the coast and in-between.... This is the prettiest, most inviting welcome center!! Love the gardens... the iris were stunning as well as the grounds meticulously maintained!”

Kudos to West Virginia

Pamela and David

And our golden retrievers



Benefits Counselor Q & A

West Virginia Department of Rehabilitation Services is making big moves to address shortage of Benefits Counselors statewide and the long waiting list of clients needing benefits counseling. Audra Spenia from Job Squad Inc. became the first CRP staff certified to provide services. She sat down with WVARF CEO, Nita Hobbs, to share some insight about the certification process and what impacts this could have on other CRPs participants in the state use program. *

Nita: Could you describe the process to become certified for the benefits counselor position?

Audra: First is the intro to Social Security Benefits Course. I completed that twice, once in 2019 and again in October 2023. Next, I applied and was accepted to Part 1 Certification. It is somewhat competitive because they have a limited amounts of spots for the entire United States. Priority is given to WIPA's and super WIPA's (providers and supervisors), as well as ENs (Employment Networks). Job Squad had been a registered EN for quite some time, so we had a leg up in that sense. After being accepted into the program I began two weeks of Zoom training (two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon). There was a lot of supplemental homework and reading assignments. Then I began the assessment testing, which was 9 multiple choice tests and 3 written assignments where I had to build the programs and plans that I would be providing for client services. You pass or fail and only have two attempts to pass. I'm currently in Part 2, where I am providing services, but to be fully certified I still must submit 3 BSA (Benefit Summary Analysis) reports before I am fully certified.

Nita: That sounds like a big investment.

Audra: It is. That's why the DRS sponsorship was so vital to my participation. It was kind of always on Job Squad's radar to pursue because it would be a good service for our ticket to work clients. We just didn't know if we would receive enough tickets for it to be worthwhile for the organization. I also had a lot of support from my supervisor, especially during the Zoom training weeks—it was essentially two weeks where she took over many of my duties and asked that my coworkers come to her instead. Each test being pass/fail with only 2 chances was also nerve wracking. If you fail, you must start over from the beginning. All your time and your organization's investment in you would feel wasted. It was a lot more of an intense process than I was anticipating.

Benefits Counselor Continued

Nita: I'm sure you're aware that we've been advocating for rate increases for janitorial services for quite some time. I've fielded questions from several CRP leaders who are concerned that they will need to cut hours if their employees start earning more compensation. I'm sure you hear that from clients as well. How do you respond to that concern?

Audra: In West Virginia it's hard to convince someone who's receiving benefits that they can still work. In reality, there are numerous incentives to get beneficiaries off of benefits, such as a "Trial Work" period where a SSDI beneficiary can earn as much money as they desire for a nine-month period and it does nothing to their check. There is also an extended period of coverage. Say a beneficiary starts making \$2000/month, they can work, and they want to continue working because they are earning more than their social security benefits. They can use an "Extended Coverage" period where they can continue receiving Medicare and Medicaid for three years!

There are also other incentives like impairment related work expenses. For example, if a beneficiary needs to ride the KAT (Kanawha Alternative Transit) Van because they have a disability, that cost can be considered into their benefits that social security determines. It's the same with copays for medications. Seasonal work is also a consideration. That all just needs to be communicated to Social Security, which is one way I can assist the client. They can even set aside money to go to school. There are so many safety nets in place to guide a client through the transition into full-time work, it really "busts the myths" about benefits and "losing your check."

A big part of my job is working through scenarios—say they are currently making \$12/hr but have an opportunity to make \$17/hr. We look at all the possible outcomes together to help them determine their best path forward. The benefits coordinator role doesn't stop there though, we set up multiple touch points to guide the client through the whole process.

Benefits Counselor Continued

Nita: Many state use CRPs have small staffs who “wear many hats.” What advice would you give these CRPs regarding the overall benefit of having this type of position on staff and the time/cost that it takes to go through certification? (Is it worth it?)

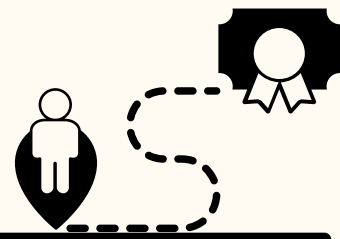
Audra: I would say if you have a small staff or are strained for time, I would concentrate on referring your clients to other CRPs who have completed the benefits coordinator training. There are several in the state currently completing their certifications. It’s good to have a basic working knowledge of benefits, of course, but I had a lot of support from my team to complete this program. I also had a solid background in DRS billing and job coaching that helped me complete the training.

WVARF is happy to share that since this interview, Audra has performed benefits counseling for 15 individuals who all decided that they want to move forward with their employment goals! If you have questions for Audra about this process, you can contact her at alycans@jobsquadinc.org. More CRPs are currently completing the certification process to provide benefits counseling. For an updated list of all CRPs accepting referrals for clients in need of benefits counseling, please contact Marsha Spiker at marsha.r.spiker@wv.gov or 304-382-4849.

*Interview responses are summarized with permission of the interviewee unless quotation marks are used.



Custodial Apprenticeship Program



The West Virginia Association of Rehabilitation Facilities (WVARF) is proud to announce the statewide launch of its Custodial Apprenticeship Program!

Apprenticeship is a time-proven model that results in highly skilled employees, a reduction in turnover and quality service to the end customers. It is an opportunity for employers to tap into a ready and willing workforce to meet their organizational needs, and for employees to “earn while they learn” because, let’s face it, many people don’t have the time or the financial resources to put their lives on hold while pursuing a traditional 4-year degree.

What sets this program apart from others is that it is specifically focusing on career advancement for individuals with disabilities. 1 in 5 West Virginians have a disability. In fact, WV has the highest number of citizens with disabilities and the lowest employment rate of citizens with disabilities of all the states. Disabilities come in many forms: physical, cognitive, or developmental, and having a disability is one of the biggest barriers to gainful employment. We believe there is dignity in work and that West Virginians who have the ability to work have the right to work. This program has the potential to have a direct impact on up to 256 apprentices this year alone.

A successful pilot program was conducted with Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP), SW Resources, Inc. of Parkersburg, WV. The program is now poised to roll out to nine additional CRPs statewide. Each of these CRPs have sent their trainers through a three day “Train-the-Trainer” course conducted by the International Sanitary Supply Association (ISSA). We are happy to announce that all 19 participants in the training class are now ISSA Cleaning Management Institute Certified (CMI) Professional Trainers!

Congratulations to ISSA CMI Certified Professional Trainers:

- Mary Dean with Buckhannon-Upshur Work Adjustment Center in Buckhannon, WV
- Eugene Weems and Rusty Wilmoth with Goodwill Industries of Kanawha Valley in Charleston, WV
- Greg Mullens and Kimberly Jarrell with Integrated Resources, in Mullens, WV
- Robert Henline with Job Squad in Bridgeport, WV
- Michelle Smith with Mercer County Opportunity Industries in Princeton, WV
- Jarod Butcher with The Op Shop in Fairmont, WV
- Andrea Hilling and Robert Pierce with PACE Enterprises in Morgantown, WV
- Rebecca Hall with Prestera Health Services in Huntington, WV
- Dakotah Hyre and Maryann Wolfe with Preston County Workshop in Reedsville, WV
- Alex Engle and Randi Patterson with SW Resources in Parkersburg, WV
- Michael Holyfield with WorkAble Industries in Stonewood, WV
- Misty Mayville, Gary Wolfe, and Andrea Higginbotham with WVARF in Charleston, WV

At the completion of the Train-the-trainer course, WVARF held a signing ceremony with distinguished guests to help celebrate this first step in our apprenticeship journey! A link to local news coverage can be found here

<https://www.wowktv.com/news/west-virginia/kanawha-county-wv/west-virginia-association-of-rehab-facilities-offers-apprenticeship-program-for-custodians/>

Trainers are now back at their home bases and ready to coach apprentices through an approximate fourteen-month combination of theory-based related classroom instruction and paid on-the-job training. The apprentices will earn progressive wage increases as they gain skills and competency. Once the program is successfully completed, apprentices will receive a portable nationally recognized credential issued by the U.S. Department of Labor, which articulates into college credit.

WVARF would like to thank our partner, the US Department of Labor, Office of Apprenticeship and the contributors to our Apprenticeship Advisory Committee: WV Department of Rehabilitation Services; WV WorkForce System; WV Department of Economic Development; WV Department of Education and CRP Representative Job Squad, Inc.

West Virginia is receiving national recognition from the US Department of Labor, Office of Apprenticeship for developing the first apprenticeship program of its kind—specifically focusing on career advancement for individuals with disabilities. WVARF is also proud to announce its partnership with WV Division of Rehabilitation Services. WV DRS sponsored the \$25,000 cost to fund the Train-the-trainer course. WVARF looks forward to expanding the scope of this program in the future to encompass additional vocational pathways and career trajectories for WV residents.

Together, we can advance the ability for disabled West Virginians to have competitive integrated employment statewide.

For more information on Registered Apprenticeship, please visit:
<https://www.apprenticeship.gov/>



Coming Up!

ANNUAL AWARDS BANQUET

Thursday, October 10th

STATE USE DAY AT THE CAPITOL

Tuesday, February 25th

STATEWIDE CRP OPEN HOUSES

Wednesday, September 25th



Do You have News You want to Share?

Do you have news that you feel is exciting and that you would like to share? Send it to us so it can be featured in our next newsletter.



**"WITH THE NEW DAY COMES NEW STRENGTH AND NEW THOUGHTS."
ELEANOR ROOSEVELT**