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## *Mission: Employable* Podcast

### **Episode 14: David Mitchell talks about Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services**

Ryan West 0:00

Hello, everybody. Welcome to the mission employable podcast. My name is Ryan West, I am your host, thank you for joining us. We have a wonderful, wonderful show today about helping individuals with disabilities and the awesome stuff that goes on around the state. Before I get into that, I do want to check out [IowaWorkforceDevelopment.gov](http://IowaWorkforceDevelopment.gov) that is [lowaworkforce.development.gov](http://lowaworkforce.development.gov). Get on our email list. Also, do us a favor at [IowaWorkforceDevelopment.gov](http://IowaWorkforceDevelopment.gov). Do us a favor in the state. Leave us a review for the podcast. The more reviews we get the higher they go up. Hopefully you give us five stars. That gets the podcast pushed up, but we'll get it to more people. It'll give it to people outside of the state of Iowa. Hopefully they'll hear it and say "Oh my gosh, I need to move to Iowa." That's what we want. Do us a favor. leave us a review if you have time. Today's guest - His name is David Mitchell. He is the administrator of the Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services commonly referred to as IVRS. The agency that helps individuals with disabilities get plugged in with workforce opportunities, wealth of information, this is a great episode, sit back. And here we go.

*(Podcast Theme Music)*

Welcome to the mission employable podcast. My name is Ryan West, I am your host. Today's show is all about vocational rehabilitation and discussing how we can create workforce opportunities and those workforce opportunities that are out there in the state of Iowa for individuals who have disabilities. And we're really lucky to have this guest joining us today he has a wealth of information on this subject, what they do around the state is pretty unbelievable. And I don't think a lot of people really realize that, which is exactly what we want to try to do with this podcast. So joining me on the microphone today is the administrator of Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services for the state of Iowa. That is, of course, Mr. David Mitchell. David, thank you very much for making time to advocate for those who have disabilities in the state of Iowa. Welcome to the mission employable podcast.

David Mitchell, IVRS Administrator 2:11

Thank you, Ryan, it's a pleasure to join you in this conversation about a topic that's really important to both of us. And that's employment.

Ryan West 2:18

Yeah, and those partnerships between what you guys offer at the vocational rehabilitation services. And what we do at I workforce development are all over the state, just lots of collaboration. And for those of you who don't know, we commonly refer to the Iowa vocational rehabilitation services as IVRS. So if you hear that, throughout the podcast, you know what we're talking about today, even high level overview, what do you guys do at IVRS? What do you offer, give us the rundown.

David Mitchell, IVRS Administrator 2:46

What we're all about is employment. So it fits in perfectly to this podcast, Ryan, again with the acronyms. IVRS is Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services. And we're actually the largest division in the Iowa Department of Education. And actually, we have two major divisions. One is our disability determination services. So much like what Iowa Workforce does with unemployment, we do with disability claims processing, that's 100% federally funded through our Social Security Administration. But what I want to talk about is the VR program. And that's where we get into our mission of employment. We have 244 staff that are spread out across the state that are really dedicated to providing services to people with disabilities. We're an eligibility program. So you have to be eligible for services, which means you have a disability that creates an impairment to employment, we document that through medical information. And then you're open to this wide array of services that are really designed to help you obtain, maintain and optimize your employment. So I think that's a key piece of all this. It's not really about just getting your first job or your second job is how do we help you become self sufficient to meet your employment dreams. We receive state funding that matches four times federal money. So we're state federal partnership that brings in money to Iowans to really help them address employment. So when we talk mission employment, we really want you to think of our workforce partners, our education partners, and certainly vocational rehabilitation, because we work collaboratively across all of our state systems to really create an effective labor exchange system. You know, VR is a little bit unique, and that we really stress, a dual customer approach. And by that I mean, we work with our business customers, and individuals with disabilities. You know, I love this tagline, Ryan and I, our tagline for 2021 is we want to be at the intersection of disability expertise, and business intelligence. And we get that business intelligence by partnering with our business partners. That makes sense, because the more we know about what a business needs, then the better we can do in providing services to individuals with

disabilities, and counseling and guidance to help them get to that eventual destination. When we talk business services, some people ask, "Well, what are you talking about?" Well, we can offer pre-screened qualified job applicants, we can talk about the Americans with Disabilities Act, we can look at education and information, we can go into a business site and do a job analysis to help the business identify what work tasks are there, we can provide assistive technology services to help look at accommodations and support, we can provide various information about disability topics. And we can connect them to other resources in our workforce exchange system to connect them with a resource that they need.

Let me flip this over, though, on the service side of things for the people out there listening, that happened might have a disability or have a loved one with a disability. It's really about individualized services, and how those services help meet the needs of each person. In Iowa, we really believe that we're an employment first state, which means everybody can work with the right services, and the right supports. And it's really up to us, us being those of us in the labor exchange system to figure out what those services and supports. So when a person walks in the door, the real value of the service delivery is getting to know that person and discovering that individual's interests, their talents, their contributions, their desires, and then helping them figure out how do we integrate those things into a plan for employment. So that means we can do some evaluation, we can look at assessments, we can provide counseling guidance, we can do employment planning, we can look at labor market information, and what's the labor market tell us another catchy phrase I mentioned Employment First earlier, but we love this concept of progressive employment. So progressive employment is really there's something for everyone. How do we figure out where you are in that journey. So it could be an informational interview, it could be a job shadow, it could be work readiness, it could be work based learning, it could be education, post secondary training, on the job training, and the VR services are such that we have some resources that we can help fund all of those things. We spent last year over \$4 million in post secondary education, to help people with disabilities get into those high demand future ready Iowa jobs, both at our community college and post secondary level, we also do on the job training, apprenticeship type training. So it really, again, is designed to meet the individual needs and the supports that are called by the person and the disability.

Ryan West 7:48

Yeah, fantastic stuff. And that was a ton of information. So that just kind of drives it home. The impact that your operation does in the state of Iowa in one of the things I just was so naive about it when and this isn't just with your agency, but with so many, how much partnership he touched on this a few times in the referring and the passing of making sure the customer has the best possible experience. And certainly you guys are doing that at the utmost level. You guys also I think it's one of the just so everybody knows, there's a lot of common ground between the Iowa Workforce staff and your staff. In fact, we have some commingled offices around the state. Can you touch on that really quick, David?

David Mitchell, IVRS Administrator 8:27

Yeah, I really appreciate you mentioning that. Ryan, I want to go on record. And I heard you talk about this in earlier podcasts about the dedication of your staff and how they worked through the pandemic, with the unemployment processing, and kudos to that - what a great effort that they've made to make a difference for lowans. And as things are continuing to improve and open up. I know we're transitioning back to a few more of those core services related to employment, but the flexibility and adaptability of the Iowa work staff, and what they've done to keep everything moving, has allowed vocational rehabilitation staff to really do what we do best. And that's to focus in on the employment. So there's one stop centers across the state and VRS president, all of those, we have core partner groups that work on a state plan that's very consistent with the Workforce Innovation opportunities. And it's really all about how do we align services in Iowa, that create capacity for all of us to focus on focus on employment. And what's really cool about this is it looks a little different in Decorah, Iowa, than it might in the Quad Cities or in Council Bluffs. So the ability to work with those local partners and the local businesses to figure out what that niche is and how do we work with the workforce development boards, to partner with them to meet those local needs is so important, and it kind of fits right back into what I was explaining about VR being an individualized service. It's really an individualized service that fits within whatever location you're in, in the state. And if, if we're not there for you, or we can't have an answer, we have partners that we're collaborating and talking with. And there's there's greater wisdom in the power of all of us.

Ryan West 10:12

Yeah, for sure. That's a great explanation of it. Certainly in that partnership goes on and on and on. And that's really key. Thank you for mentioning that about the overworked staff, and kudos to your staff for continuing to, to push forward in this last 12 months of just oddity. And I think that's a good segue, because you know, this podcast is really all about, as you said, a couple of times workforce and opportunity. Not too many people may know this, but the folks with disabilities in the state of Iowa is our largest group we're trying to employ. And you know, you've kind of touched home on this already, as on several key points with what we try to do with getting individuals into a path that fits them. Can you talk, expand about that specific piece a little more,

David Mitchell, IVRS Administrator 10:52

I know, one of your first podcast featured the governor, and the governor has done a great job articulating this vision about future ready Iowa. And the governor also says, you know, for us to get all lowans working, it really includes that untapped potential of individuals with disabilities.

And it really is one of our largest pools of applicants that we have. And for us to best meet our business needs, we really need to look at how do we accompany and better address the needs of all Iowans, including those with disabilities, as you talked about, I kind of hate to say this, but I started in the business back in the early 1980s. And when I started as a VR counselor, it was very well known that VR was really the best kept secret. Yeah, well, I, you know, it's probably still that way today. So again, opportunities like this podcast, to get information out to Iowans to say, Hey, we don't want to be the best kept secret we want you to, to know what we're doing. And then reach out to us so we can help meet your needs, both from a business standpoint, and from that individual with a disability. It's really important. And I know as we align those services across our partners, we're really all working better to improve the visibility of all of our state employment programs, says we're talking about people with disabilities. Oh, you know, it's interesting, though, some people are born with a congenital condition, and others require it later in life maybe doing due to an accident. But we're really talking about any type of disability. And the VR program works with all disabilities. In Iowa, we're fortunate to have a partner agency called the Iowa Department for the blind, which works with individuals with visual impairments. So they take care of the visual vision issues. And then Iowa Vocational Rehab works with all other types of disabilities. And we know as we age, that we're all going to be impacted by disability. So you know, whether it happens directly to us, or to a family member, or personal member or loved one, it's going to happen, it's going to be around us. So by understanding some of those resources that can help address employment, it really is valuable. The other piece, as we're talking about people with disabilities, that sometimes goes unnoticed, is 40% of the work we're doing are with students with disabilities. So in Iowa, we're fortunate that we have a VR staff person that's assigned to every public school district in the state, we have the community colleges and the region schools represented. So as we look at opportunities to create early career preparation, what a great time to impact that for students with disabilities in our you know, ninth grade to 12th grade as they transition out into the world of work, the earlier impact we have on those students, the better off we're going to have as an economy. So we're seeing again, about 40% of our caseload, and it's expanding as we work with young people in our school programs. And what a great opportunity to impact that as we talk about some of the cool initiatives that are occurring in Iowa with the stem, the science, technology, engineering and math programs, future ready Iowa, our apprenticeship, our work based learning programs, actually had a conversation just this last week with our partners at the Iowa Department of Education, on how we can create more opportunities for students with disabilities to access career and technical education classes while they're in high school. And boy, when they get that exposure early, it'll feed right into some of those career pathways that will open up, you know, really a world of opportunity. So we're all about specially with these with the students with disabilities in our youth, really working with our families, our parents, our teachers, to make sure that everybody has an expectation that this is going to end up in employment, we can all work and we know that there are strong benefits when people go to work.

Ryan West 14:56

Yeah, and I would be remiss, David, if I did not follow up with a question of how do people reach out, you know, parent, neighbor or family member, whatever, how do people get ahold of you, the staff within IVRS What's your elevator pitch for that,

David Mitchell, IVRS Administrator 15:15

I think, you know, the more resources and the more information a family has, the better off they can be in knowing which option is best for them. So I would really encourage them to explore all those resources. And what better way to start that than walking into your one stop center, and working with our workforce partners. And in every one of those workforce centers, you'll get it, you're going to get somebody that's going to be knowledgeable about the programs and the partnerships, which includes vocational rehabilitation. I love that concept of, you know, every doors, the right door, well, as you open up those doors at the at the Workforce Center, it's a great way to start that employment journey. But you can also Google vocational rehabilitation, and our website will pop up and you can reach out either virtually electronically, or pick up the phone and dial into a local office, we have 13 area offices across the state, we serve every county in the state, and we can we can come see you. You can come see us or we can connect virtually. And we're finding some ways in this new world that we're in right now, to be able to use some of those electronic telework, virtual communications to really be more effective in saving everybody's time and capacity to get access to the services somebody needs. You know, I, it's interesting, as we're talking about youth in, and students with disabilities, it popped in my mind, I gotta go to the other extreme of that, though, we have a great partnership with the Iowa Department for Aging. In fact, we share some dollars together. And we hire employment specialists that work with our Area Agencies on Aging, and those are VR funded positions. But they're working with VR, eligible job candidates. So these are people 55 and older, they have a disability, and they get to merge together, those issues that you face as you get older, with the world of work and employment and disability. So if you're if you happen to be on that spectrum, 55 and older and have a disability and you're interested in working, boy, have we got tools for you. So it really does span the whole spectrum of age 14, as long as you want to be working, we got a program for you.

Ryan West 17:30

Yeah, and it starts at age 14, I'm glad you brought that up. David, I was gonna ask you. So that's the starting point, again, website for IVRS is [ivrs.iowa.gov](http://ivrs.iowa.gov) ton of information out there, you really can get a whole picture of the state. Real quick, David, let, let's kind of go the other side of things. You know, there's a there's this talent pool of individuals with disabilities, just looking

for opportunities, you know, as an employer for hopefully, plenty of employers around the center listening to this episode, or just community leaders. What are some misconceptions with folks with disabilities, that way you can help kind of clear the air on to give more of an opportunity for those individuals with some disabilities.

David Mitchell, IVRS Administrator 18:10

You know, sometimes from a business perspective, if they haven't had any experience working with people with disabilities, they'll have some preconceived perceptions that well, maybe our insurance rates will rise or, boy, our work comp costs will increase or where we're going to have attendance issues. But you know, a person with a disability is very much like any other person, it's very individualized, it goes both ways. Just because you have a disability doesn't mean you were a superhero cape, you don't have superpowers. But you also don't have to be institutionalized and have an expectation that you can't do anything. You know, the United States is really had a long and storied history, history of disability rights. And it really boils down, I think, to we're more alike than we're different.

*(Music for podcast promotional break)*

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*(Promotional break ends)*

David Mitchell, IVRS Administrator

But, you know, I saw as we as we talk to businesses, and about hiring people with disabilities, it's really about finding the right match for the business. There's not, you know, it doesn't mean that there's, there's a perfect position for a person with a disability. It's not about there's no right job for a person with this disability. But there are good jobs that people with disabilities can do. So as we're working with our business partners, it's really helping them expand that talent pool and better understanding what are you looking for, and how can we help provide an individual who has those skills and interests to be able to meet that need. And that's why it's really important as we look at service delivery, where we have opportunities to look at and assess the person's work abilities and provide experiences, whether it's a work based learning or work experience or on the job training, that to give them that hands on experience, again, for progressive employment journey, not that, "hey, we're going to place in the job and then that's all you're going to do for the rest of your life". What's the starting point? How do we

build from there, not only to help the individual grow, but to help meet the employers needs. Because the employee, you know, businesses, I'm sure will realize that their business today looks a lot different than it looked 18 months ago. And they have different skills and credentials and a team that that they need. So how do we partner with them to help upskill individuals and get those measurable skill gains to help meet their needs as the as the workforce changes in the world of work changes, and it's going to look different, you know, in another 18 months, we have adoptable. And that's why it's cool to be able to work with our workforce partners and to be able to connect with businesses and the labor market information and get a better handle on what's the local economy need today, how do we best meet that? And how do we provide the adaptability and flexibility to provide a positive experience, you know, six months from now, that's the other valuable piece about vocational rehabilitation, is we just don't make that connection. And then, Ryan, were there for the long haul, we can provide the follow up services and the follow along services to help make sure that there is that progressive employment strategy that really took place.

Ryan West 21:47

Yeah, I mean, IVRS is there from beginning to end, and an all in one solution to really help not only the individual with a disability, but the employer, which kind of real quick and maybe there's not a perfect answer for this, David, but you know, is there an industry? Or are there folks with disabilities who reach out say, "Hi, I'd really love to get into this industry". And it's been a little harder to tap into. Thoughts on that?

David Mitchell, IVRS Administrator 22:11

I'm not sure there's any one particular area that's harder or better to get into. But I think what, what I'd like to kind of steer that conversation to is the opportunities we have in the in the labor system, to really help prepare individuals to meet our business needs. And it really fits right back into future ready, Iowa. And I think there's really exciting potential as we look at apprenticeships and hands on learning. You know, I mentioned earlier, Ryan, that we're spending over \$4 million in tuition and fees and to help some of those supports for students as they go into our post secondary training programs, Community College and Regent level. But boy, there's equally exciting opportunities as we look at the construction industry and healthcare industry and production and manufacturing, that feed into some of those apprenticeship and hands on learning opportunities. At is really an untapped area for all lowans, but particularly lowans with disabilities, there's sometimes not thought of, and we're working hard with our school programs and, and our STEM councils to really make sure it includes all individuals. And I think that's going to be an area that we're going to see some exciting growth in the future. And so as for business partners, it's another great way to to get your foot in the door and provide some opportunities to get pool of candidates in there that



you get a chance to observe and learn and see, hey, this person can do that. That's really exciting.

The other piece I haven't talked about that I want to make sure I mentioned real quickly too, is entrepreneurship. In Iowa vocational rehabilitation, we actually have two business specialist positions, that all they do is focus on self employment. And that includes business plan development, financial feasibility, they assessment and evaluation, the connection to small business administration and our various resources to help with entrepreneurship. And we're seeing some, again, really exciting opportunities that are really only limited by the imagination and innovation of our job candidates and our staff think about how do we take this and develop an industry that will help meet this need. And we're seeing that across the board with some entrepreneurs that are doing some exciting things now.

Ryan West 24:47

Awesome, awesome information. Great response, David. And there's just really just tons of opportunity as what I derive from your answer there and I agree between the partnership certainly you guys leading the charge and getting businesses engaged in - and opportunities for the individuals disabilities and so all across the board, okay? In the interest of time, you've provided a wealth of information and you kind of touched on this in the beginning, I think with your slogan for 2021 number one goal for 2021, or any or any closing words you'd like to leave us with?

David Mitchell, IVRS Administrator 25:16

Ryan, that's a great segue into kind of how we can maybe wrap this up too. But, you know, 2020 and 2021 has been unprecedented and for how we're working in this environment and the pandemic, and I think there's so many positive things going on to help us move the economy forward. So as I look at that, and the impact on the pandemic has had on Iowans, one of the biggest impacts is on people with disabilities. So as I look at that, and consider what the future looks like, you know, our goal is employment and believing, and it's possible, possible for all Iowans. And we're going to continue to work on expanding on those expectations, and really creating the services and supports that we need to make sure Iowa workers with disabilities have the training, the skill preparation, the experiences they need to take to the jobs of today, and the jobs of tomorrow. And we do that through some of those future ready Iowa strategies, looking at those high demand sectors that provide for optimal employment and self sufficiency. As I think about the number one goal, it's really about creating patience and aligning those services across our core partners. In that way, we don't do it alone, but that we do it better together.

Ryan West 26:36

Yeah, absolutely great stuff. So there you go. Ladies and gentlemen, you can check out more information by heading over to [ivrs.iowa.gov](http://ivrs.iowa.gov). That is the Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services website ton of information. David Mitchell, ladies and gentlemen, the administrator a wealth of information to you and your staff. Thank you for all your help and your partnership with Iowa workforce development. And thank you very much for making time. Great information. David.

David Mitchell, IVRS Administrator 27:00

Thank you, Ryan.

Ryan West 27:02

Thank you for listening to this episode, everybody. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. David, I want to thank you one more time for coming on. Fantastic information. Great stuff look forward to talking to you down the road. Okay, employers looking for positions to fill. Do not forget to look at those individuals with disabilities. They have very unique sets of skills that can lend well to many of the positions that you have available out there. So fantastic stuff you want to make sure you check out that website is David talked about, there is a ton of opportunity within the IVRS agency to help you connect to those workforce needs. Also, make sure to check out I will [iowaworkforcedevelopment.gov](http://iowaworkforcedevelopment.gov) that is [iowaworkforcedevelopment.gov](http://iowaworkforcedevelopment.gov) Get on our email list. And while you're there, make sure to get plugged into the future ready Iowa opportunities. Those opportunities are going to be abundant. And there's going to be some really cool opportunities to grab some post secondary education on the cheap, my friends. So until next time here is to you putting all this in play and finding your future career path.