Deaf People and Vocational Rehabilitation:

Who Is Being Served?
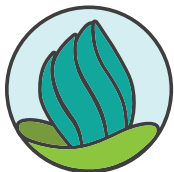
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Introduction

Vocational rehabilitation (VR) services are designed to support disabled people in their pursuit of employment goals. VR provides vocational assessment and evaluation, transition skills development, on-the-job training, career counseling, and postsecondary education and training to reduce labor force disparities. In 2017, VR agencies across the nation received 569,530 new applications and served 975,359 people, leading to 175,458 improved employment outcomes.[1] Of those people who applied for VR or received services in 2017, 7.9% were deaf.

This research brief provides insight into the characteristics of deaf people who have applied for or received services from VR agencies. The data can be used to inform recruitment efforts, identify gaps in populations being served, and better understand who is being served in the United States. Historically, vocational rehabilitation has sought ways to better serve deaf people by providing staff who are uniquely trained and qualified (e.g., rehabilitation counselors for the deaf, 34 CFR § 361.18) and building relationships with organizations and educational programs that specifically serve deaf people. Despite these efforts, deaf people continue to face significant barriers that contribute to education and employment gaps between deaf and hearing people.[2]

Statistics in this report are sourced from the VR case files for the 2017 program year (July 1, 2017 to June 30, 2018). It includes people who applied for services, people who were waitlisted, people with open cases, and people whose cases were closed during the period. These data mainly come from information shared by participants during the intake process. Further information about this dataset and the analyses can be found in the Methods section of this report.

Key Findings

- Of all the people who applied for or received VR services in 2017, 7.9% were deaf.
- A smaller percentage of deaf people who applied for or received VR services were younger than 24 years old (28.2%) compared to other disability groups, in which the average percentage of people under 24 was 48.3%.
- On average, a greater percentage of men applied for or received VR services, but among deaf people, a majority were women (51.7%).
- White people are overrepresented among deaf people who applied for or received VR services. Only 36.3% of deaf people in the VR database are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).
- A greater percentage of deaf people who applied for or received VR services have been placed on a waiting list (9.2%) than average (6.9%).
- A smaller percentage of deaf people who applied for or received VR services (4.4%) received pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS), or specialized career training for youth, than the average (10.5%).

> NDC uses the term *deaf* in an all-inclusive manner, to include people who may identify as deaf, deafblind, deafdisabled, hard of hearing, late-deafened, and hearing impaired. NDC recognizes that for many people, identity is fluid and can change over time or with setting. NDC has chosen to use one term, deaf, with the goal of recognizing experiences that are shared by people from diverse deaf communities while also honoring their differences.
>
> **https://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/defining-deaf**

Disability

In the United States, 13% of people have a disability.[3] Among this population, 51.8% have a mobility disability, 40.1% have difficulty with independent living, 39.2% have a cognitive disability, 28.1% are deaf, 21.5% have difficulty with self-care, and 18.8% have a visual disability. Among deaf people, 20.9% are deafblind, 33.3% are deafdisabled, and 45.5% have no additional disabilities.

Over 94,000 deaf people contacted VR about services between 2017 and 2018, accounting for 7.9% of all the VR case files (Figure 1). Among deaf people, 5% were deafblind, 31% deafdisabled, and 64% had no additional disabilities (Figure 2). The representation of disability groups was different in the VR dataset, where most people had a cognitive disability, and the majority of deaf people did not have additional disabilities. Considering that around 55% of deaf people have additional disabilities according to the U.S. Census, it appears that many deafblind and deafdisabled people are not receiving support from VR or their additional disabilities were not identified within the VR system.

FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE BY DISABILITY

COGNITIVE	COMMUNICATIVE	DEAF	MOBILITY	VISUAL
67.1%	1.2%	7.9%	19.2%	4.7%
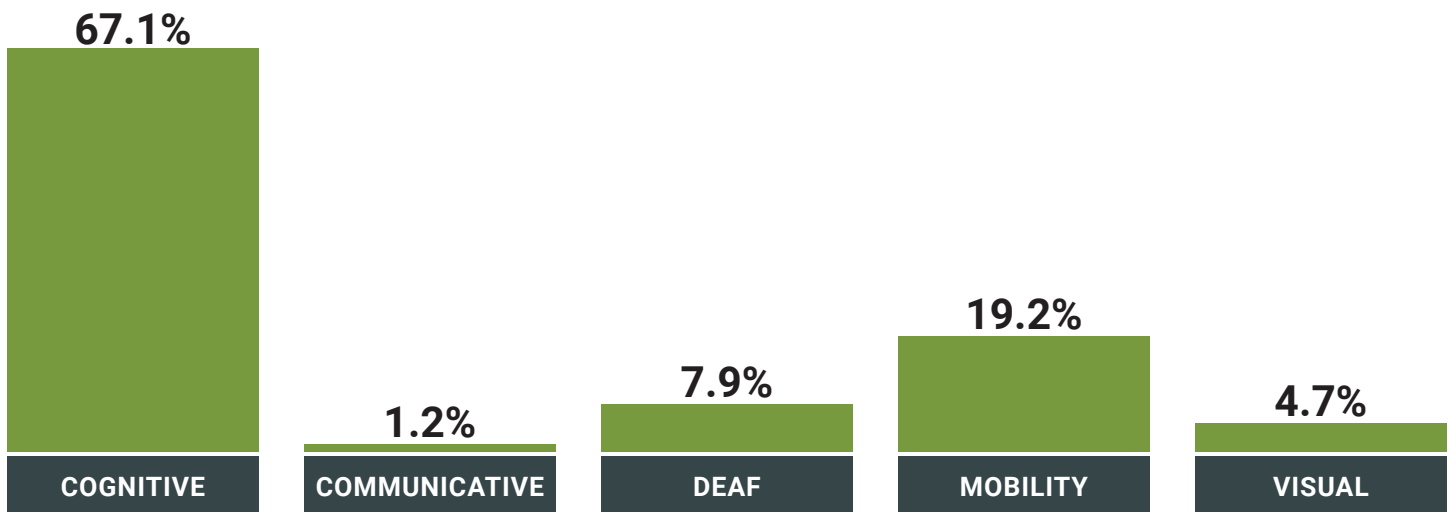
FIGURE 2: PERCENTAGE OF DEAF BY DISABILITY

DEAFBLIND	5.0%
DEAFDISABLED	31.0%
NO ADDITIONAL DISABILITIES	64.0%
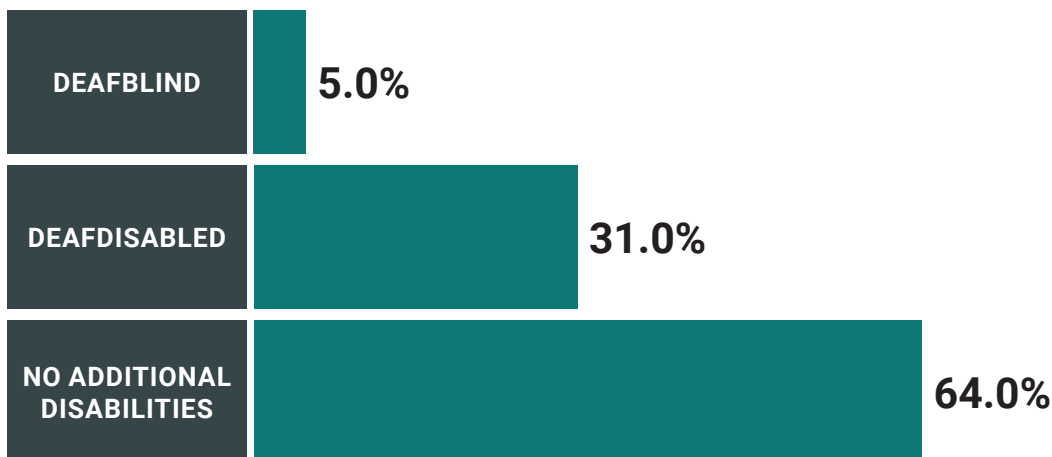
Age

Vocational rehabilitation agencies work with a wide range of people, from young adults to older workers who have lost or are in danger of losing their jobs. In 2014, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was passed to support career advancement, job retention, and increased programming and opportunities for transition-aged youth. As a result, VR agencies started providing more services to younger people. Among deaf people who applied for or received VR services, only 28.2% were younger than 24 years old (Table 1). For other groups, such as people with cognitive and communicative disabilities, the majority of participants are transition-aged youth (58.0% & 76.2%, respectively). The majority of deaf people in the VR database are between the ages 25 and 64, suggesting that the type of services deaf people need from VR may differ from those that other disability groups need, and the services continue to be needed throughout the course of a deaf person's life. It is also possible that deaf youth may not be familiar with VR services. A slightly higher percentage of deafdisabled people in the VR database are transition-age youth, compared to deaf people without additional disabilities (34.1% vs. 25.2%; Table 2).

TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE BY AGE

	ALL DISABILITIES	COGNITIVE	COMMUNICATIVE	DEAF	MOBILITY	VISUAL
< 25	48.3	58.0	76.2	28.2	24.2	33.6
25–64	49.8	41.5	23.0	61.1	72.8	62.2
65+	1.9	0.5	0.9	10.7	3.0	4.2

TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE OF DEAF BY AGE

	DEAFBLIND	DEAFDISABLED	NO ADDITIONAL DISABILITIES
19–24	29.7	34.1	25.2
25–64	62.8	59.1	62.0
65+	7.4	6.8	12.8

Gender

Although the Rehabilitation Act (P.L. 99-506) is explicit about nondiscrimination, historically, VR has provided services to more men than women.[4,5] As shown in Figure 3, that trend continues to be true today, where the majority of people who applied for or received VR services were men (55.6%). However, among deaf people, a slight majority are women (51.7%; Figure 4).

FIGURE 3: PERCENTAGE BY GENDER

	WOMEN		MEN
	44.4%	ALL	55.6%
	42.3%	COGNITIVE	57.7%
	34.3%	COMMUNICATIVE	65.7%
	51.7%	DEAF	48.3%
	48.5%	MOBILITY	51.5%
	47.9%	VISUAL	52.1%

FIGURE 4: PERCENTAGE OF DEAF BY GENDER

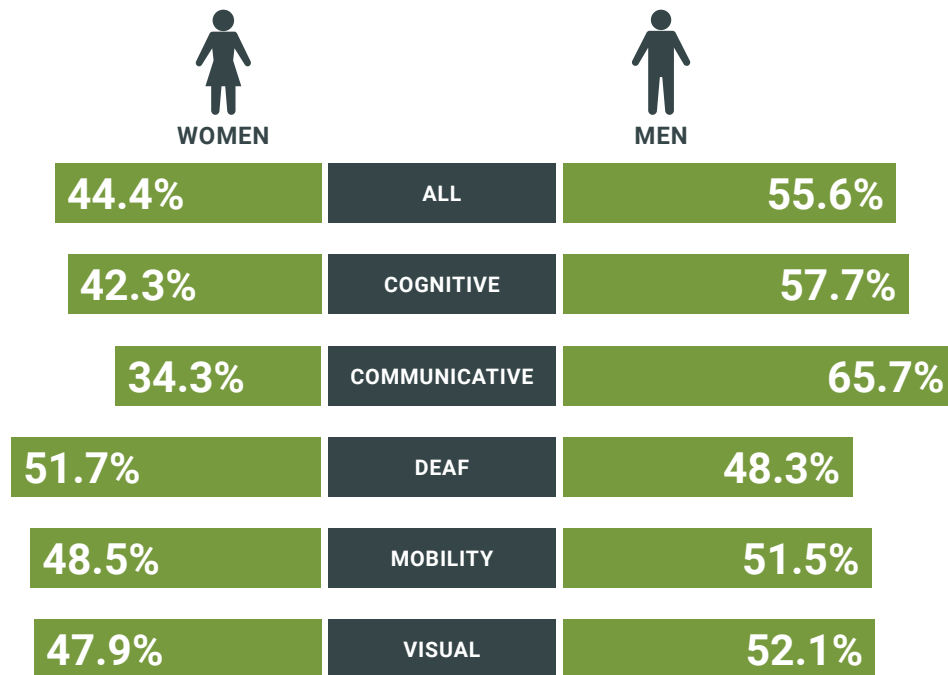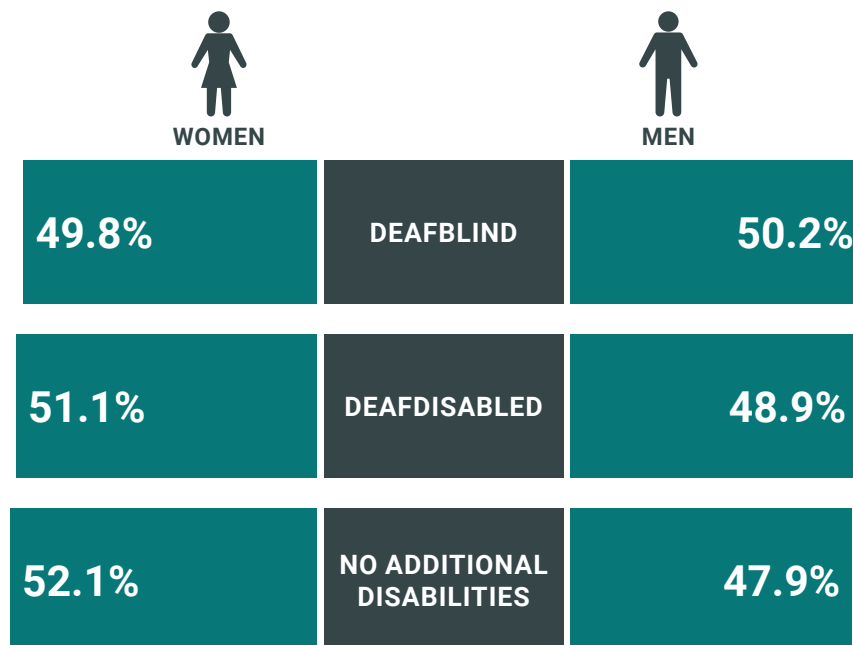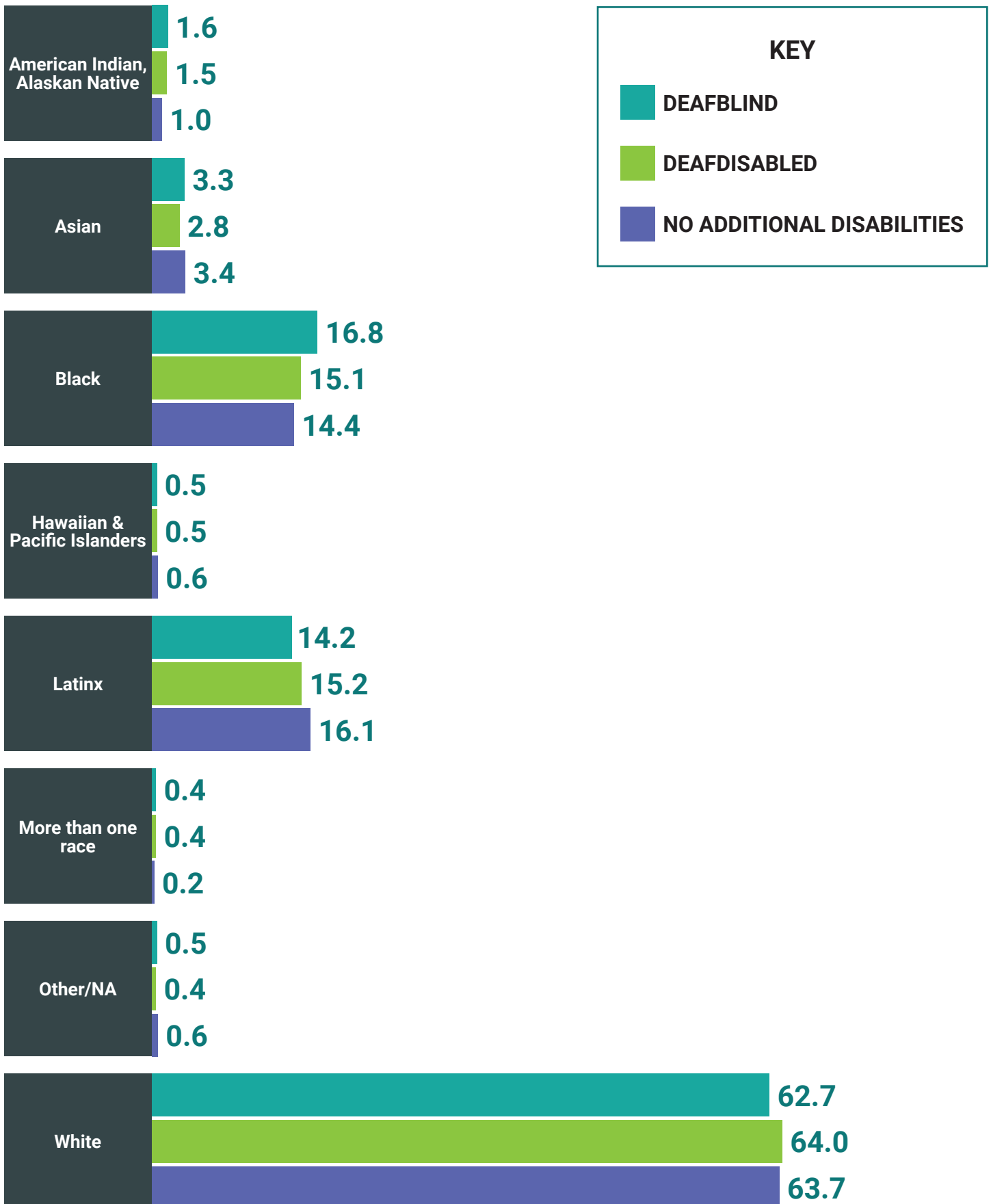|	WOMEN		MEN
	49.8%	DEAFBLIND	50.2%
	51.1%	DEAFDISABLED	48.9%
	52.1%	NO ADDITIONAL DISABILITIES	47.9%

Race and Ethnicity

In the United States, 28.3% of disabled people are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).[6] VR generally serves a more diverse population; 44.8% of people who applied for or received VR services were BIPOC. Yet, among deaf people who contacted VR, only 36.3% were BIPOC (Table 3). The percentage of deaf people who were white (63.7%) was higher than any other disability group (52-58%). Across race and ethnicity groups, the group of deaf people least represented compared with other disability groups are Black deaf people, who were only 14.8% of deaf people compared to 23.2% of hearing people in the VR database. There is little difference in the percentage of BIPOC across deafblind, deafdisabled, and deaf people without any additional disabilities (Figure 5).

Systemic racism negatively affects employment opportunities and experiences for deaf BIPOC, who are largely underemployed and underpaid in the United States.[7] The lower incidence of deaf BIPOC participating in VR services is a significant area of concern.[8,9]

TABLE 3: PERCENTAGE BY RACE/ETHNICITY

	ALL DISABILITIES	COGNITIVE	COMMUNICATIVE	DEAF	MOBILITY	VISUAL
American Indian, Alaskan Native	1.6	1.6	1.5	1.2	1.8	1.3
Asian	2.0	1.8	4.7	3.2	1.7	3.1
Black	22.6	22.2	17.3	14.8	26.5	27.0
Hawaiian & Pacific Islanders	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.5
Latinx	17.2	18.1	17.4	15.7	14.9	15.2
More than one race	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.3	0.5	0.4
Other/NA	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.6
White	55.2	54.8	57.5	63.7	53.7	51.9

American Indian, Alaskan Native
- 1.6
- 1.5
- 1.0

Asian
- 3.3
- 2.8
- 3.4

Black
- 16.8
- 15.1
- 14.4

Hawaiian & Pacific Islanders
- 0.5
- 0.5
- 0.6

Latinx
- 14.2
- 15.2
- 16.1

More than one race
- 0.4
- 0.4
- 0.2

Other/NA
- 0.5
- 0.4
- 0.6

White
- 62.7
- 64.0
- 63.7

KEY

- DEAFBLIND
- DEAFDISABLED
- NO ADDITIONAL DISABILITIES

Waiting List

When there are not enough resources to serve everyone who has requested services from VR, agencies are expected to prioritize services for people with the most significant disabilities and those who are in danger of losing their jobs, a process that is called order of selection (OOS). Many states have implemented OOS through the use of waiting lists. In this dataset, 6.9% of all people who applied for or received VR services have been on a waiting list (Figure 6). A higher percentage of deaf people (9.2%), or nearly 9,000 deaf people, are currently on or have been placed on a waiting list (Figure 6). Even though OOS is designed to prioritize people with significant disabilities, 8.6% of deafdisabled people and 5.2% of deafblind people have been on a waiting list (Figure 7). Due to variable resources across states, the percentage of deaf people being placed on waiting lists may be much higher in some states than in others.

FIGURE 6: PERCENTAGE WHO HAVE BEEN WAITLISTED

ALL	COGNITIVE	COMMUNICATIVE	DEAF	MOBILITY	VISUAL
6.9%	6.4%	6.7%	9.2%	8.3%	4.2%
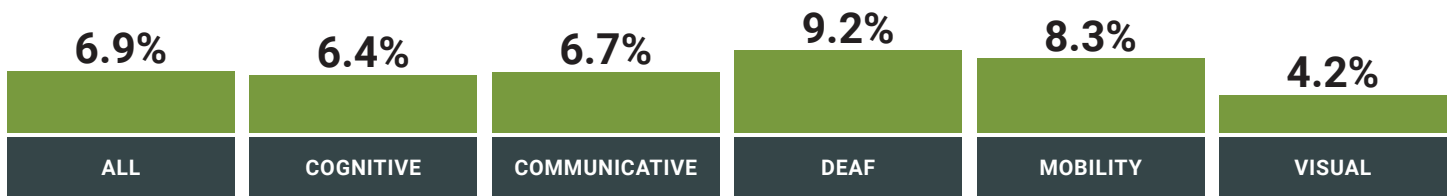
FIGURE 7: PERCENTAGE OF DEAF WHO HAVE BEEN WAITLISTED

DEAFBLIND	5.2%
DEAFDISABLED	8.6%
NO ADDITIONAL DISABILITIES	9.7%
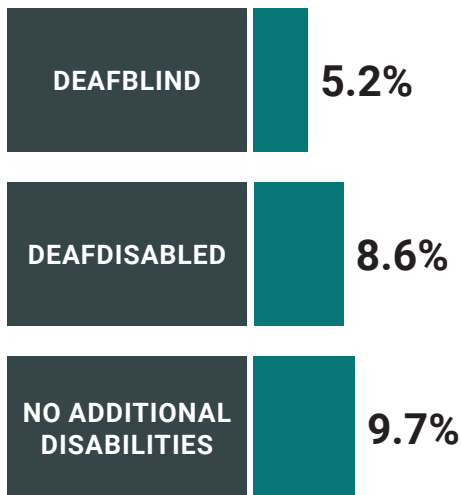
Social Security Benefits

In the United States, 12.3% of deaf people between the ages 21 and 64 received Social Security Income (SSI) in 2018,[10] and 4.7% of people between the ages 18 and 64 received Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI).[11] For the most part, people who receive disability benefits are presumed to be eligible for vocational rehabilitation services. In this dataset, 19% of VR participants receive SSI and 15% receive SSDI (Table 4). The percentage of participants receiving SSI and SSDI in the VR case files varies across disability groups. For example, approximately 24% of people with a mobility or visual disability receive SSDI compared to 14% of deaf people. A larger percentage of deafblind and deafdisabled people receive financial assistance from the Social Security Administration than deaf people without additional disabilities (Table 5).

TABLE 4: PERCENTAGE RECEIVING FEDERAL ASSISTANCE

	ALL DISABILITIES	COGNITIVE	COMMUNICATIVE	DEAF	MOBILITY	VISUAL
Receiving SSDI	14.8	11.6	7.2	14.2	24.4	23.8
Receiving SSI	19.2	19.4	17.8	17.4	18.3	24.0

TABLE 5: PERCENTAGE OF DEAF RECEIVING FEDERAL ASSISTANCE

	DEAFBLIND	DEAFDISABLED	NO ADDITIONAL DISABILITIES
Receiving SSDI	27.9	18.6	11.0
Receiving SSI	27.9	21.6	14.5

Pre-Employment Transition Services

In 2014, the WIOA required VR agencies to dedicate 15% of their federal funds for pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) to disabled youth who are currently enrolled in school (20 CFR § 683.120). Pre-ETS are designed to support transition-aged students with career exploration and preparation for adult life. In 2017, more than 4,000 deaf people received Pre-ETS through VR. Overall, only 4.4% of deaf people who applied for or received VR services received Pre-ETS (Figure 8). Nearly 27,000 deaf people in the VR database are under 25 years old (see Table 1) and many of them qualified for Pre-ETS, but did not receive it. Among deaf, more deafblind (5.8%) and deafdisabled youth (6.7%) received Pre-ETS than deaf youth without any additional disabilities (3.3%; Figure 9). The data from 2017 reflect early stages of Pre-ETS implementation; current data would be expected to show higher rates of service provision.

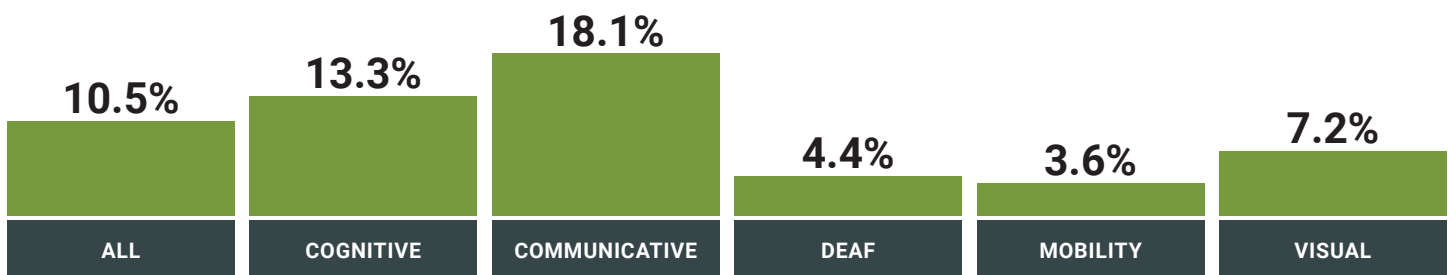**FIGURE 8: PERCENTAGE RECEIVING PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICE**

ALL	COGNITIVE	COMMUNICATIVE	DEAF	MOBILITY	VISUAL
10.5%	13.3%	18.1%	4.4%	3.6%	7.2%

FIGURE 9: PERCENTAGE OF DEAF RECEIVING PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES

DEAFBLIND	5.8%
DEAFDISABLED	6.7%
NO ADDITIONAL DISABILITIES	3.3%
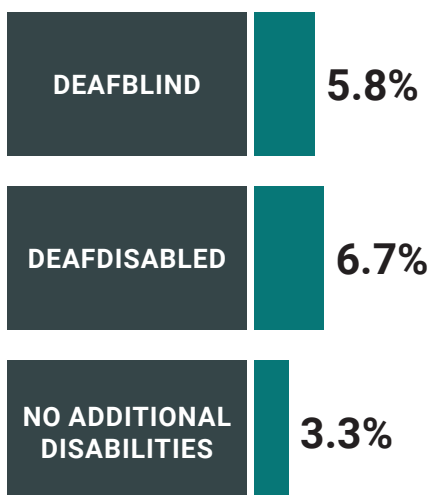
Conclusion

Vocational rehabilitation is an important source of support for deaf people who are working toward their employment goals. In 2017, 94,517 deaf people applied for or received VR services. Key takeaways from this data report are summarized below, along with specific considerations for VR agencies.

- The majority of deaf people in the VR database were white. VR agencies may need to strengthen relationships with deaf BIPOC communities and recruit more deaf BIPOC VR counselors and service providers.

- A larger percentage of deaf people have been placed on waiting lists than other disability groups. VR agencies may need to evaluate policies and procedures related to placing deaf people on waiting lists and ensure the availability of appropriate assessment and identification of additional disabilities.

- A smaller percentage of deaf people received Pre-ETS than other disability groups, and fewer deaf people under the age of 25 applied for or received VR services. VR agencies may need to increase their capacity to reach out to deaf youth and provide Pre-ETS.

State agencies can improve the recruitment of deaf youth and accessible programming by working together. Collaboration between systems—within institutions, communities, and states—is critical for promoting deaf success. The National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes offers resources and support to you and your community:

- **VR Resources**
- **Pre-ETS Resources**
- **Research & Data Reports**
- **E-Learning Courses**

Methods

The data in this report were sourced from the Rehabilitation Services Administration Case Service Report (RSA-911) for the 2017 program year, which spans July 1, 2017 to June 30, 2018. The 2017 data file includes case information for more than 1.2 million people who contacted VR, including demographic characteristics, services provided, and reasons for case closure. More information can be found at **https://rsa.ed.gov/911-data**.

This report focuses primarily on the nearly 95,000 people who sought vocational rehabilitation servives and reported being deaf as a primary or secondary disability. In this population, three subcategories are examined: deaf with no additional disability, deafblind, and deafdisabled. In order to align with other large-scale national datasets, and for ease of readability, groups were created based on VR's 19 disability categories.

The percentage of individuals who received Pre-ETS is based on the entire 2017 dataset. Subsequent reports will provide data based on only eligible participants (i.e., enrolled in school and of transition age). Similarly, the percentage of individuals who have ever been waitlisted are based on the entire dataset. Future reports will explore differences across states and agencies that may be related to how states implement OOS.

Disability Groups

Cognitive: a person who has a primary cognitive disability (including psychosocial and other mental impairments)

Communicative: a person who has a primary communication-related disability

Deaf: a person who has a hearing disability listed as a primary or secondary disability (including deafness, hearing loss, and hearing impairment)

Deaf With No Additional Disability: a person who has a primary hearing disability and no secondary disability

Deafblind: a person who has both a hearing disability and a visual disability

Deafdisabled: a person who has both a hearing disability and any other disability (excluding visual)

Mobility: a person who has a primary mobility disability (including physical, orthopedic, and dexterity impairments)

Visual: a person who has a primary visual disability (including blindness and visual impairment)

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