

**Millions in savings.**

**1,000 users.**

**And a new network.**



GEORGIA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AGENCY

**June  
2016**

# Bringing IT (and Savings) In House

Two years ago, GVRA paid the Georgia Department of Labor roughly \$10 million for IT support. Last year, the bill was about \$6 million. This year? \$3.5 million. And next year? Well, according to GVRA IT Director Mike Riley, that number will be close to zero.

So what changed? Since taking the helms of the agency's information technology team several years ago, Riley and his staff have worked to build an IT infrastructure in house and independent of GDOL.

Needless to say, this was never going to be a small undertaking.

"It's a massive transition," Riley said. "There's so many moving parts, and so many employees to transition over."

Once it's finalized—slated for around September of this year—all agency staff who use a computer for work will have a new laptop complete with top-of-the-line software designed not only to make work more efficient, but also more mobile.

Gone are the days of being chained to a desk for fear of missing an email. GVRA's workforce, especially those out in the field, are more and more out of the office, visiting clients and providers and building the relationships necessary for GVRA to serve as many Georgians as possible.

What started out with just Riley has now grown to a team of 10 IT specialists, with one more slated to be hired in the coming months. This is significant because, with roughly 40 offices in the state, it's important for there to be a dedicated team of staff to ensure that networks stay up and to troubleshoot issues both big and small.

to keep up with documents and emails from anywhere with an internet connection.

But that was only one part of the equation. In addition to the hardware and software being distributed, the team was also tasked with developing and implementing a brand new network—hence the transition from



"We needed an internal IT support structure that could not only reduce the economic burden on us but also provide consistently high-quality service," said GVRA CFO/COO Jimmy Wilson. "I think we've done that."

In addition to the new hardware, staff will be equipped with Windows 10, Skype for Business, Office 365 and Microsoft One Drive, all of which allow staff

[gvra.ga.gov](http://gvra.ga.gov) to [ablegeorgia.ga.gov](http://ablegeorgia.ga.gov).

All in all, said Riley, his staff has done a tremendous job with the implementation.

"They've been working extremely hard," he said.

Anyone with questions about the transition can contact Riley at [Mike.Riley@ablegeorgia.ga.gov](mailto:Mike.Riley@ablegeorgia.ga.gov).

# *From Doubt to Success*

Tekela Thomas started work at the Georgia School for the Deaf in early January this year, and already she's thinking about a career change. Sort of.

During the school year, she worked the third shift, largely making sure everything at night ran

acquired skills.

"I love to sign," she said. "I've taught my sister and my niece and my nephew."

Rewind three years ago, and the prospect of requesting a shift change—much less even having a job at all—seemed like a pipe dream.

Her counselor, Frank Lala, worked with her to help her realize that with a few accommodations, she could certainly work and live independently, and to help her along the way, he recommended she spend time at the Cave Spring Center.

While there, she quickly made friends and adjusted to life at the center, transitioning from a student to an office intern, answering the phone, making copies and doing the appropriate filing. She used a magnifying app on her phone to help her see, and she used a hearing aid to amplify phone conversations.

The key to her success, said Raquel Tarleton, an employability specialist at CSC (pictured on the right with Thomas on the left), is that Thomas was such a strong self advocate.

"Self advocacy really helps in terms of removing barriers," Tarleton said. "You know yourself the best, and you know what you need to succeed."

Her time at CSC, Thomas said, helped her get the skills needed not only to work but to live independently. She recently bought an apartment, and she said she loves to cook.

"I was kind of nervous learning all the skills that I needed," Thomas said. "But I did it, and I'm glad I did."



smoothly, and none of the students needed any special attention. But her real passion is in interacting with the students, and ever since learning sign language at the Cave Spring Center (CSC) two years ago, she takes every opportunity to teach it to the younger kids at the school. And she plans on talking with her supervisor when school resumes to see if she can switch to second shift, which would afford her the opportunity to further employ her recently-

"I never felt like I could get a job," Thomas said. "It was just, like, it wasn't going to happen."

Thomas has Usher Syndrome, which affects both her hearing and her sight, and it usually degenerative over time.

Early in her diagnosis, Thomas wasn't sure if she could hold down a job, and that's where vocational rehabilitation came in.

# *Expansion of Executive Leadership*

As many of you are aware, our agency is undergoing a large-scale transformation, with the end goal being a more efficient agency that will consistently serve more clients than ever before. A part of that transformation involves the reassessment of how the agency is run. That being said, the decision was made to expand the Executive Leadership Team (ELT), giving the agency a solid foundation in which to build in the coming years.

Take the time to get to know your new ELT and the diverse backgrounds that they bring to the table.

***Greg Schmiege- Executive Director***—Greg has more than 40 years of professional service in the health and human services field. His career has included executive positions, such as: Rehabilitation Director for a private non-profit rehabilitation agency in Missouri; a hospital CEO for a fortune 500 private healthcare company in Wisconsin, Texas and Georgia, the Executive Director for the Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute for Rehabilitation; and he currently serves as the Executive Director for the state agency of Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency. Mr. Schmiege has a Master's Degree from Southern Illinois University and is currently completing his Doctorate degree in Rehabilitation at Auburn University. Prior to his

professional career, he served in the United States Navy during the Vietnam conflict and was the recipient of the Navy League Award.

***Jimmy Wilson- Chief Financial Officer/Chief Operating Officer***—

Jimmy Wilson is a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) serving as Chief Financial Officer and Chief Operating Officer for Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency. He leads the fiscal operations of the Agency, which includes: Budget Administration, Financial Services, as well as Facilities, IT, Business Applications and Provider Relations. Prior to joining GVRA, Jimmy served as Chief Financial Officer of the Southeastern region of Fiserv Inc. For 23 years he was a key member of management for one of the nation's leading financial data processors. He started his career as an auditor with Deloitte in Atlanta, GA. Mr. Wilson is a native Georgian and a graduate of Georgia State University. Jimmy served his country as a member of the United States Air Force. He is married to Renee A. Wilson and is the father of two children.

***Kevin Harris- Chief External Affairs Officer***—

Kevin leads the agency's efforts to engage external constituencies and the networks of support for Georgians with disabilities.

He oversees internal and external communications including government relations, public awareness, marketing, media relations, and board relations. During the legislative session, his primary duties focus on representing GVRA and the clients served. Kevin is a native Georgian and a seasoned veteran at the Georgia Capitol. Kevin has extensive experience in economic development and government at the local, state and federal level. His career began at Truett-McConnell College where he served as a faculty member and later Department Chair of Government. Continuing to teach Government and Public Administration on an adjunct basis, he became an economic and small business developer at the local and regional level. During his career, he has been responsible for marketing and communication efforts for statewide and regional campaigns. Kevin currently is a certified Economic Development Finance Professional (EDFP). In professional and consulting capacities, he has worked for a number of elected officials including Nathan Deal, Casey Cagle, Tom Graves, Stephen Allison, and Newt Gingrich. He is a graduate of Young Harris College, and holds the distinction as a Double Dawg from the University of Georgia, earning a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and Master of Public Administration.

# ***ELT Biographies Continued***

## **Robert L. Nibbs, Jr. – Chief Business Development Officer—**

Robert Nibbs has spent the past six years working in Georgia state government focused on strategic partnerships serving individuals with disabilities. Recent assignments include Executive Director and Chief Strategist for the Georgia Department of Human Services and currently as head of the newly-formed Business Services Division for the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency. Robert has more than 25 years of leadership experience within state and federal government, Fortune 100 organizations, start-ups, non-profits and public sectors. Robert volunteers his time on various community initiatives including youth development and grade-level reading. He is heavily involved with the Brookings Institute Think Tank and Atlanta Community Partners targeted on poverty elimination. As a committed servant leader, Robert is an active member of St. James United Methodist Church of Alpharetta, GA. Robert holds an MBA from Northwestern University Kellogg School of Business and bachelor and master's degree from Ball State University. He has participated in numerous executive education programs including the University of Michigan Ross School of Business, Williams College and Indiana University, as well as international study

programs in Eastern Europe, Western Europe, Asia, South Africa, and Central America. Robert is a Leadership Atlanta, Leadership Greater Chicago and Leadership Indianapolis Alumni Fellow. He and his wife, Anita, reside in Atlanta and have a daughter and son.

## **Marya Calhoun- Chief Human Resources**

**Officer—**As Chief Human Resources Officer at Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency, Marya is responsible for the development of all human resources strategies and the delivery of HR services and programs. She has more than 15 years of human resource experience in the corporate sector as well as state government. Her expertise is working with large and small organizations in a variety of industries including distribution, healthcare, technology, and banking/finance. Marya earned her Bachelor's degree in Finance from Alabama State University and an MBA from Nova Southeastern University. She is a member of the Society for Human Resource Management and the Metro Atlanta Society for Human Resource Management.

**Rajaunnda “Raj” Gandy – Chief Strategy and Innovation Officer—** Rajaunnda D. Gandy, commonly referred to as “Raj” has served in the field of rehabilitation of people

with disabilities for over 19 years. Raj began her career at Goodwill industries as the Facility Based Work Transition Manager. A short time later Raj was selected as a Business Enterprise Program Counselor for the Georgia Department of Labor where she also served as Program Manager for over 3 yrs. Raj was then appointed as the Director of the BEP where she worked tirelessly for 13 years. Raj worked as Interim Project Champion for the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency's (GVRA) Project Horizon. Raj is currently a member of the National Rehabilitation Association (NRA) and Georgia Rehabilitation Association (GRA). Raj received a BA in Psychology from University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa and later obtained an MS in Rehabilitation Counseling from Mississippi State University, Starkville. Raj is married and the mother of two children.

## **Elizabeth DeJanes- Chief Legal Counsel—**

Elizabeth leads the Legal, Compliance, and Policy functions of the agency and ensures that its programs are fully compliant with applicable laws and regulations. Her area supports the agency's efforts to develop innovative and robust programs aimed at putting more Georgians with disabilities back to work and working with our youth to intervene sooner in the vocational rehabilitation process. Prior to joining GVRA, Elizabeth served for

# *ELT Expansion Continued*

16 years as a legal executive of a multinational biopharmaceutical company whose mission it was to help people with severe diseases manage their illness so they could live purposeful and productive lives. While there, she helped pioneer new patient initiatives and consumer marketing programs, as well as supporting day to day operations. Elizabeth is a native of Ohio, but considers Georgia her home. She graduated from Ohio State

University and the Walter F. George School of Law.

**Rita McWhorter- Chief DAS Officer**—Rita works to ensure that disability claims are adjudicated fairly and in a timely process. She has been with Disability Adjudication Services since 2010 where she served as the legal services officer. From there, she assumed her current role in June of this year. A lawyer by trade, Rita graduated from the

University of Georgia with a BA in Broadcast Journalism, then received her law degree from the Loyola University School of Law. She has previously worked as a news reporter at WMAZ in Macon, as a law clerk at Catholic Charities of New Orleans, as an attorney with the Fuller Law Group and an administrative hearing officer for the Georgia Department of Labor.

## *Recent Agency Hires*

GVRA is always looking for the best talent to move our agency forward and help us achieve our mission of helping Georgians with disabilities find meaningful work and live independently.

Below are new GVRA hires as of June 8. If you see any of these folks, make sure you welcome them into the GVRA family.

### **Athens VR**

Christi Bryant Duncan and Aleeshia Lynn Longino

### **Tifton VR**

Cindy Ann Mathis

### **School Counselor VR**

Chester Morris Dever

### **Agency General Counsel**

Stephany Alicia Sheriff

### **Agency Information Technology**

Charvis Terrell Fuller

### **RWS**

Robert M Miller

### **GIB Bainbridge**

Dorothy Elaine Kindle and Orlando James Salgado

### **DAS Stone Mountain**

Robert Yusef Atkins, Chantry Denise Fann, Lisa Frazier, LaTeashia C. Jones, Dianne Margaret LeMaitre, Shaleea L.Petty, Dorothy Ann Shaw, Leah Marie Smith and Nakita L Sutton.

Welcome everyone!

**Welcome to GVRA  
Everyone!**

# *Lights, Camera, Employment*



In mid June, GVRA Executive Director Greg Schmiege as well as others representing agency success stories gathered at the Georgia Public Broadcasting building to shoot a short film about GVRA's accomplishments and the way it will operate moving forward.

Schmiege, pictured above, spoke of the agency's renewed commitment to serve 100,000 Georgians annually and find 50,000 of those employment.

Micro-enterprise and entrepreneurship, he said, would be a new component of the agency's efforts, and he commended staff for all their hard work in the years since the agency became independent of the Georgia Department of Labor.

In addition to Schmiege, the video features several GVRA clients turned employees and a vendor from the Business Enterprise Program.

Each spoke of their own abilities, which enables them

to work and live independently.

The video is currently in post production with footage being shot from as far as Bainbridge.

Stay tuned in the weeks to come to see the final product. Where to find it? It's easy! Follow us on Facebook at [facebook.com/ablegeorgia](https://facebook.com/ablegeorgia) on Twitter at [twitter.com/ablegeorgia](https://twitter.com/ablegeorgia) or go to our website at [ablegeorgia.ga.gov](https://ablegeorgia.ga.gov).

# Expanding Our Horizon Breakthrough to Excellence



## ANNUAL LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

SAVE THE DATE July 19-21, 2016

**Registration link will follow !**

For additional information please contact Tania Scott

Phone: 404-232-1801 Fax: 404-232-1968

Email: [Tania.Scott@ablegeorgia.ga.gov](mailto:Tania.Scott@ablegeorgia.ga.gov)

EXPANDING  
OUR HORIZON  
BREAKTHROUGH TO EXCELLENCE

**GVRA**  
GEORGIA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AGENCY