

*GVRA Welcomes
RSA Commissioner
Janet LaBreck*



March 2016

GVRA 

GEORGIA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AGENCY

Commissioner's Visit

GVRA recently played host to Rehabilitation Services Commissioner Janet LaBreck. Over the day-and-a-half visit on March 8 and 9, GVRA staff highlighted the many innovative approaches the agency uses to reach individuals with disabilities and help them find and maintain work.

“It was certainly an honor to have Commissioner LaBreck visit Georgia,” said GVRA Executive Director Greg Schmieg. “We know we’re doing great things, but we wanted to let the RSA folks from D.C. get a firsthand experience of all that we’re doing.”

The visit began with presentations from the various Project Horizon teams who, along with contractors from iServiceX, are exploring the ways that GVRA streamlines processes, connects to consumers and hits greater outcome goals.

That was followed up by a presentation from GVRA’s new Business Services Division. Business Services Director Robert Nibbs explained how the agency is

making new and important inroads with the business community, with the ultimate goal being to provide those employers with a skilled workforce of GVRA clients.

Commissioner LaBreck said she admires the way GVRA is thinking outside the box, noting that other states have shied away from innovation for fear of not meeting federal requirements. It’s not one or the other, she said.

“Policy is important but you can’t stop trying new models and methods because you’re so wrapped up in policy,” LaBreck said.

After lunch, the Commissioner—who was joined by her husband Russell LaBreck and Chris Pope, RSA’s liaison to Georgia—traveled north of Atlanta to Kennesaw State University (KSU). There, she met with university officials as well as members of KSU’s Academy of Inclusive Learning. The Academy, which works in conjunction with GVRA, offers a fully inclusive college experience to students who do not meet the standard admission

requirements because of developmental disabilities. The program involves enrollment as non-degree seeking students who audit typical university courses. They benefit from social integration, career exploration and training resulting in a Certificate of Social Growth and Development. The KSU experience is much more employment-focused than similar programs across the country.

LaBreck then met with Travis Jordan, a student at the Academy who also has a paid internship with the bakery in the university cafeteria.

“I’m happy to have a job,” Jordan told the Commissioner. “The Academy helped me do this.”

From there, LaBreck and her entourage headed to Cole Electric, an employer GVRA has worked with in the past, meeting with the owner and a GVRA client who works there as an administrative assistant. The next morning, Commissioner LaBreck was back in Atlanta, with the last portion of the visit being an explanation of GVRA’s E3 program.

Visit Continued

E3—which stands for explore, engage and employ—was born out of a Federal transition grant. Its aim is to reach students with disabilities while they're still in middle and high school and help provide the building blocks to a career when they graduate.

“It was really nice to be able to share this project with the Commissioner and her team,” said GVRA Director of Transition Dale Arnold. “It’s great to know that we have such strong partners not only here in Georgia but also at the Federal level.”

Throughout the visit, presentations featured agency staff and future Leadership, highlighting the agency’s direction.

At the end of the presentation, Agency leadership presented Commissioner LaBreck with a small glass peach with the inscription “Keep Georgia on Your Mind.”

“I’m honored to have spent the last few days with you, and I think you’re doing great things here in Georgia,” LaBreck said.

Although Commissioner Janet LaBreck lost her vision by the age of ten, she has never let her disability get in the way of advocating for the blind community, LaBreck was appointed Commissioner of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind by Governor Deval Patrick.

As an ambassador for more than 30,000 legally blind residents, LaBreck organized campaigns that have effectively increased employment opportunities for the blind.

The Commissioner’s award-winning internship program has been replicated throughout the country.

Commissioner LaBreck has an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from the New England College of Optometry, a Masters of Education degree from Springfield College and Bachelor of Arts in Human Services from the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

In August of 2013, the United States Senate confirmed LaBreck as the Commissioner of Rehabilitation Services Administration within the United States Department of Education.

In 2013, the Urban League of Springfield selected Commissioner LaBreck as their Urban League 2013 Community Builder Award Recipient, as a result of her exemplary leadership and commitment to build strong and vibrant communities. In 2013, President Barack Obama announced some key administration posts, including his intent to nominate Janet L. LaBreck as RSA Commissioner.

In 2012, Commissioner LaBreck was recognized by Healing Winds, the Lanesboro, MA-based American Indian cultural and educational non-profit organization as the 2012 Rock, Rattle & Drum honoree. In 2011, Commissioner LaBreck was the recipient of the “Profiles in Vision” award, given to her by the New England College of Optometry.

LaBreck Visits GVRA



Above: Commissioner LaBreck meets with Tangye Teague and members of the Constituent Services team. Below: The Commissioner poses with GVRA staff and faculty of the KSU Academy of Inclusive Learning.

D.C. Comes to GA



Top left: Project Horizons Committee Chair Denine Woodson describes potential agency changes.

Top right: LaBreck and her team meet with staff from Cole Electric, a VR employment partner.

Below: Labreck and GVRA Exec. Director Greg Schmieg talk to staff following lunch at KSU.



Planning for the Future

The Project Horizon team has been hard at work in recent months to look at all GVRA processes and procedures and determine the best course of action going forward. The team, which is working in conjunction with business consulting firm iServiceX is tasked with delivering their report by July 1.

This move comes nearly three years since GVRA separated from the Georgia Department of Labor, navigating a \$15 million shortfall during the same time. Now, with the agency financial health restored, leadership agreed it was time to reexamine best practices in serving those with disabilities.

That's where Project Horizon comes in.

Composed of GVRA employees and members of the iServiceX team, the initiative is broken down into three separate working groups: strategy and performance management, organizational development and value delivery.

Employees in each of these



groups have been asked to dedicate a minimum of three days a week to the project, and everyone involved is taking it seriously, knowing it will shape the course of the agency moving forward.

Through July 1, the group will continue to present its findings to the Executive Leadership Team who will then be tasked with implementing the proposed changes. These changes could take the form of additional positions being added to greater streamlining of VR processes to job title clarifications. Nothing about how the agency does business is off the table.

Meanwhile, Raj Gandy, who

is heading the project, submits weekly flash reports detailing the project's progress to all employees.

In the end, the effort will serve to not only ensure the agency serves more Georgians with disabilities, but it will also bring greater transparency to all that GVRA does.

Team members and agency leadership alike is confident this effort will transform the agency into a model that's replicated across the country.

"We know we have the potential to do great things," said GVRA Executive Director Greg Schmieg.

Photos of the SRC And GVRS Board



Top: GVRA Exec. Director Greg Schmiege provides a financial update to the GVRS Board.

Below left: SRC board members listen to a presentation promoting services for Georgians with disabilities.

Bottom right: SRC Chair Kip Slade addresses the council.



Join Us For a Job Fair

SAVE THE DATE: April 15

This year GVRA is partnering with the Mobility Expo to host a job fair during the first day of the event, and organizers are expecting thousands of attendees and dozens of businesses who are looking to hire.

The job fair will take place April 15 from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. at the North Atlanta Trade Center. It's free to both attendees and employers.

"It's a great opportunity for us to connect clients with employers who are looking to hire," said GVRA Marketing Manager Robin Folsom, who is on the event's steering committee. "And employers get connected to a whole host of qualified applicants. It's a win-win."

Last year, the Mobility Expo—which will continue through April 16—saw more than 1,800 attendees, and

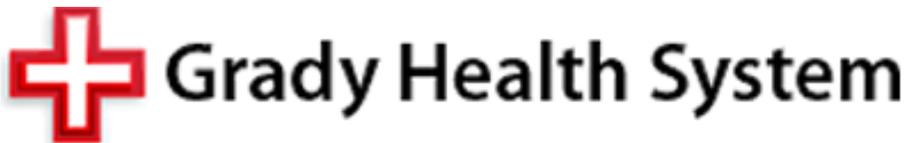
Organizers this year are anticipating as many as 3,500 attendees over the course of the two-day event.

The Expo itself offers the public a chance to see the latest technological advancements in mobility technology.

For more information on the job fair or the Mobility Expo, visit themobilityexpo.com.



*More
To
Come*



DELTA

A Unique Approach

GVRA is now working to connect with clients at a younger age, and a big part of that is the E3 program. Standing for explore, engage and employ, the program follows a philosophy of zero exclusion, meaning that every individual has the right to work in a career that best reflects their interests and skills. GVRA understands that not all careers look the same. Whether it's your typical 40-hour work week from an office, or a 80-hour work week on the farm, E3 seeks to unite students and youth with disabilities to fulfilling careers.

Starting at age 14, the E3 team helps students explore the world of work by introducing them to E3 and allowing them the ability to learn more about available industries. Through a peer-led video series, individuals are able to connect to those careers that may interest them the most. The effort will also introduce video job shadowing and skills assessments to help with making some of the tough career decisions.

Once a career path has been selected, E3 begins to engage students in what their future vocation will actually look like. The main focus during this portion of the process is experiential learning, real hands-on training and work situations that help shape future expectations for performance. Students and youth will have access to a wide array of tools and resources during this phase to help them gain the skills they are likely to utilize in the field.

After they have all the skills and knowhow to get on a career track, it's time for a job. E3 is constantly creating and strengthening connections with local employers to assess their workforce needs. E3 takes this information back to the individuals in that particular path to make sure everyone's talents and goals align. The goal isn't just to get a job, but to get a job that E3 participants love doing and excel in (leading to future promotions and opportunities).

The E3 model is based on three key concepts.

First, it is student led. They decide what job path they want to explore and map out a plan to achieve their goals. They are the decision makers, but E3 is there to support them and provide the resources to help them make those decisions.

Second, E3 provides flexibility, embracing the idea that career change is natural.

Many of the skills E3 helps to develop can be employed in multiple careers, meaning individuals can apply them across a wide variety of industries.

Third, E3 focuses on work that meets participants' interests. Students pick a career path they find rewarding.

In the coming weeks and months, the E3 program will further be fleshed out, and communication will go out as agency leadership determines the best application of all that E3 has to offer.

A Winning Spirit

Most folks know Mecole Hardman as one of the top athletes in the country and a highly-sought-after recruit. But under the pads, he's a champion in the disability community.



Mecole Hardman is a popular man with the kids at Friends Helping Friends, but it's not for the reasons one would think. They don't care that he can run a 4.42 second forty-yard dash. They don't care that he played in the U.S. Army All-American Bowl, and they don't care that he's been described as the top athlete in this year's recruiting class.

They just like that he's nice and fun to be around, and for them, that's enough.

Hardman, now a senior at Elbert County Comprehensive High School (ECCHS), has been a volunteer with Friends Helping Friends (FHF), a peer support group for students with disabilities, since 2010. That was years before he would travel across the country visiting—and being wooed—by some of the major powerhouses in Division I college football. Oregon. Ohio State. Michigan. Miami. Alabama. The University of Georgia.

Growing up less than 50

miles from campus, Hardman seemed like a natural fit for UGA, so when he committed to the school in early February of this year, the hoopla surrounding his decision didn't surprise anyone. But it didn't go to his head. After all, he said, his true passion was the kids of FHF, and where others might draw inspiration from a 5'10" 175lb rural Georgia man ascending to the heights of collegiate stardom before he even played a down, Hardman draws his own inspiration from the students.

Hardman Continued

“It’s just fun to be around all of them,” Hardman said. “People say life is hard, but looking at these kids, it’s like dang, if they can do it, so can I.”

Since his eighth-grade year, Hardman has accompanied nearly all of the 200 students with disabilities in Friend’s Helping Friend’s on field trips across the southeast. They’ve gone to Braves games. They’ve gone to the Georgia Aquarium. They’ve visited pumpkin patches in North Georgia, and they’ve

gone to the Greenville Zoo across the state line in South Carolina. The goal of the program, said FHF Founder Sandy Adams, is to provide social and educational opportunities for the students that they wouldn’t normally have. Hardman, she said, as well as the 300 other middle and high school volunteers, take the time to travel with the students and make sure they have the best experience possible. Ultimately, she said, it helps show the students that they’re not different from

anyone else.

To the students, Adams said, it doesn’t matter if you’re a star athlete on the verge of your freshman year of college or the President of the United States. All they care about, she said, is that you’re their friend.

“They don’t know what Mecole is about to become,” Adams said. “You can tell who they like, and they’re drawn to him because he’s so kind and genuine, and that’s what makes him so special.”



We've Moved (Not Far)

The main office location for GVRA has moved, but not far. Visitors now will need to come to the 5th floor of the Sloppy Floyd Building.

External Affairs and reception has been moved to this space, which previously housed VR administration.

Visitors should also note: Parking for 200 Piedmont Avenue, SE is located at the **Pete Hackney Parking Deck**, 162 Jessie Hill Jr. Dr., SE, Atlanta, Georgia 30334. The cost for visitor parking is \$5.00.

Once parked in the Pete Hackney Parking Deck, take the elevator or stairs to the 5th level of the parking deck which has the entrance to the pedestrian bridge. The pedestrian bridge will take you over Jesse Hill Jr. Drive and into the Butler Parking Deck. In the Butler Parking Deck, take the elevator or stairs to the 3rd level (BR). Take the bridge into the Floyd Building. You will enter the Floyd Building via the East Tower. Walk across to the West Tower. This is where you will encounter the security guard post.

Due to necessary security measures, you should plan to arrive 15 minutes prior to start of an event. All visitors must enter through Twin Towers security before proceeding to your desired location within the building. You will have to go through the security checkpoint before you will be able to access the elevators necessary to reach the 5th, 10th or 14th Floors. You will be asked to present picture identification, and both you and your belongings are subject to search at the discretion of building security.

External Affairs

This newsletter is produced by your External Affairs team, and like the rest of the Agency administration in Atlanta, External Affairs (EA) exists to support the work of the field staff who deal directly with clients.

External Affairs is made up of Communications, Constituent Services, Marketing, Legislative Affairs and Community Outreach.

As part of a recent initiative, EA has traveled to more than 30 field offices across the state and will soon visit those in South Georgia to complete what's been deemed a "listening tour."

On behalf of External Affairs, I want to personally thank each and every employee who has opened their offices to us and allowed us to get to know how we can serve you better.

As always, if there's anything anyone on the EA team can do to make your lives easier, please don't hesitate to let us know.

We serve so that the employees on the front lines can effectively help Georgians with disabilities find jobs, and we thank you for your service.

John Peyton Boan
Communications Manager