# PART C, CHAPTER 10.6: PROJECT SEARCH TRAINING

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| **Policy Number** | **Authority** | **Scope**  | **Effective Date** |
| Part C, Chapter 10.6 | 34 CFR [§361.48](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-34/section-361.48) | All TWC-VR staff | 9/3/2024 |

## PURPOSE

In accordance with the authority (Federal and State) listed above, this policy is issued by the Texas Workforce Commission Vocational Rehabilitation Division (TWC-VR). Adherence to these rules and regulations issued under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), supports Texans with disabilities in gaining, maintaining, and advancing in competitive integrated employment (CIE).

Specifically, the purpose of this policy and these procedures is to ensure adherence to the provision of and collaboration required for the Project SEARCH training program.

## DEFINITIONS

Informed Choice: The means by which a customer chooses their rehabilitation path, from options based on their needs and circumstances and the TWC-VR rules, as it relates to choosing to participate in Project SEARCH services and the providers of those services.

## POLICY

### General Overview

Project SEARCH is an international initiative that supports partnerships among businesses (employers), local school districts, VR agencies, and other entities that serve individuals with developmental disabilities. Project SEARCH promotes successful long-term employment of TWC-VR customers in jobs that are stable, meaningful, integrated, and competitively compensated.

The program takes place in business settings where immersion in the workplace facilitates the teaching and learning process as well as the acquisition of employability and marketable work skills. Project SEARCH customers participate in three internships to explore a variety of career paths.

Project SEARCH services include training and establishing accommodations and/or compensatory techniques as needed to increase a customer's independence and improve their ability to demonstrate soft and hard skills to meet the expectations and production standards of a host business. These services are provided through a collaborative process in which the Project SEARCH team, which includes the TWC-VR provider, host business, school district, long-term support organization, and VR Counselor, work together to help the customer achieve the goals of the internship and placement.

### Project SEARCH Parameters

* Project SEARCH service authorizations (SA) to the Employment Services Provider (ESP) should be issued using Pre-employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) funds for students with disabilities (SWD) until they have obtained employment.
* Basic VR funds must be used to purchase Benchmarks A-C (See Procedures section for additional information.).
* Potentially eligible SWD cannot participate in Project SEARCH.
* Project SEARCH Job Placement Services may not be purchased with on-the-job training services, Job Skills Training, Non-bundled Job Placement Services, Bundled Job Placement Services, Work Experience Services and/or Supported Employment.
* Any meeting among the customer, provider, customer’s circle of supports, or TWC-VR staff may be conducted remotely.
* The Project SEARCH team determines the length of the rotations at the host business (8-12 weeks).
* When a host business will not allow interns or staff onsite for safety or other reasons, the Project SEARCH team can develop an alternate training method and the VR Counselor must authorize the training method on the *VR5000*.
* *Project SEARCH Job Placement Services Plan (VR3363)* must be developed by the end of the third rotation or at any time during the rotations that the team determines job placement opportunities are available to the customer because of skills gained in the internships.
* The customer can be working in a rotation and participating in Project SEARCH Job Placement simultaneously.
* After the customer is placed in a job, if job coaching is needed for successful employment, the ESP must provide the service and may not bill separately.
* Each benchmark is paid only once for each customer between Active Status (customer has an Individualized Plan for Employment [IPE]) and Closure Status of a VR case.
* The customer must work 90 days in the same position. If a customer loses a job before the 90-day benchmark, the customer's progression towards completion of the benchmark ends. When the customer becomes employed again, the day count will start at day one for the new position.
	+ The 90-day count for successful closure will start over anytime a customer—
		- Loses their job;
		- Changes employers;
		- Changes positions with same employer;
		- Receives a promotion; or
		- Quits their job voluntarily.

### Recognized Credentials and Measurable Skill Gains (MSG)

Project Search includes training that may result in MSGs (e.g., training progress) but does not lead to a recognized credential. All MSGs achieved during participation in TWC-VR services must be entered in the Education History page in RHW.

### Standards for Providers (SFP)

The SFP manual focuses on the business practices, processes, and policies that TWC-VR and the contracted provider must follow. This VRSM chapter includes services that are provided by a contractor. For additional information regarding contractor responsibilities, service descriptions and costs, please refer to the SFP Chapter 16: Project SEARCH Services.

### Additional Policy Considerations

* Comparable Services and Benefits: TWC-VR must not expend funds on Project SEARCH services unless the VR Counselor and the customer have made maximum efforts to secure comparable services and benefits from other sources to pay for services.
* Customer Participation in the Cost of Services: A customer's eligibility for TWC-VR services does not depend on the customer's income or liquid assets; however, if the customer's net income or liquid assets exceed the Basic Living Requirements (BLR), the customer must participate in the cost of services unless an exception is granted.
* Recipients of Social Security Disability Benefits: Recipients of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), due to the customer’s disability, are exempt from the requirement to participate in the cost of TWC-VR services regardless of income.
* Exceptions to Policy: When necessary to meet the VR needs of a customer, TWC-VR staff members may request exceptions to policies and procedures through their chain of management up to the Deputy Division Director of Field Services Delivery, or designee. However, exceptions to policies and procedures based on Federal and State laws, statutes, and rules or regulations are not allowable.

## PROCEDURES

### Project SEARCH Requirements

To start a Project SEARCH site, a one-time license fee is paid to the National Project SEARCH office. Funds are provided by the school district, host business, or local community partners. These funds pay for the team's training on the Project SEARCH model and access to the Project SEARCH portal.

The national Project SEARCH office is contacted with a request to start a program by the Project SEARCH Statewide Coordinator. Project SEARCH requires that a local partner hold a licensing agreement with its office, stating that the team will follow its model. The school district typically holds the license; TWC-VR does not hold this license.

Planning is important to ensure that the appropriate amount of money is budgeted for each benchmark.

### Steps to Establish a Project SEARCH Site

To start a Project SEARCH site, the VR Counselor must contact the Project SEARCH Statewide Coordinator by sending an email to the VR Pre-ETS mailbox at vr.pre-ets@twc.texas.gov. After contact, the Project SEARCH Statewide Coordinator ensures the following partners agree to start a program:

* Education (the local independent school district [ISD]);
* Host Business; and
* Local Community Partners (e.g., local intellectual and developmental disabilities [IDD] authority).

The team, comprised of the VR Counselor, the ISD, and local partners (and possibly the host business if it has already been identified) can begin without an identified host business or ESP. The team, not TWC-VR, selects the ESP based on interviews with all team members. TWC-VR staff must then schedule interviews for interested ESPs that have a current TWC-VR Project SEARCH contract.

Once the national Project SEARCH office approves the license, the office schedules training for the team. During the formal training from the national office, they support the team by scheduling regular meetings for planning and maintaining the program. While the ISD and the ESP are involved in the daily operations of the program, the VR Counselor must maintain regular (i.e., at a minimum, monthly) communication through emails or conference calls in addition to the monthly planning meetings.

### Intern Selection Process

The Project SEARCH team interviews applicants through an assessment using a rubric system to determine who will be offered acceptance into Project SEARCH for the upcoming school year at the host business. When TWC-VR has not yet determined a student's eligibility for TWC-VR services, the student may be selected for Project SEARCH, pending a TWC-VR eligibility decision.

### Determining the Need for Project SEARCH

When a student is enrolled in an ISD that is participating in Project SEARCH and the student’s interests, skills, and abilities align with the Project SEARCH site, the VR Counselor and customer can discuss the opportunity and determine if applying to participate in Project SEARCH will meet their training needs.

### IPE Requirements

Project SEARCH customers must have an IPE that states their employment goal, participation in the program and all additional services that the VR Counselor approves for participation (e.g., transportation assistance, purchase of work uniforms).

### Project SEARCH Referral and Asset Discovery

Once the student has been determined eligible for TWC-VR services, they begin asset discovery. The SA for the asset discovery phase should be issued before the school year ends to allow the ESP time to meet with all the customers. This service must be completed prior to the start of Skills Training.

The VR Counselor must—

* Complete the *Referral for Provider Services (VR5000)*;
* Provide documentation (only when relevant), such as medical or psychological reports, case notes, vocational testing, or employment data collected by TWC-VR staff;
* Ensure TWC-VR staff send the SA and *VR5000*; and
* Review and approve the *Project SEARCH Asset Discovery Report (VR3361)*, completed by the contractor, ensuring that all outcomes required for payment are achieved and that the staff qualifications were held by the individual providing the service to the customer.

The Contractor must—

* Complete the *VR3361* with the following information:
	+ The case information;
	+ The date, time, location, and summary of all asset discovery sessions completed with the customer;
	+ Evidence of at least four asset discovery sessions and a total of at least 20 hours of contact with the customer, either individually or in a group setting;
	+ A description of the customer's abilities; and
	+ Confirmation that services provided comply with all applicable standards

### Skills Training

Project SEARCH skills training is based on experiential learning at a host business with support from the business and Project SEARCH team and is most effective when provided in person. When a host business will not allow interns or staff onsite for safety or other reasons (e.g., health pandemic), the Project SEARCH team can develop an alternate training method and the VR Counselor authorizes the training method on the *VR5000*.

Since each Project SEARCH team determines the length of the rotations at the host business (8-12 weeks), it is important that the team create a calendar showing when rotations begin and end. This ensures that TWC-VR staff members know when to issue SAs for skills training to the ESP.

The VR Counselor must—

* Meet with the customer, customer's legal guardian or representative (if applicable), and Project SEARCH team to develop goals for the customer and document these goals on the *Project SEARCH Progress Report (VR3362);*
* Note on the *VR5000* in the case of an alternate training method developed by the Project SEARCH; and
* Ensure TWC-VR staff send the SA.

The Contractor must—

* Submit the *VR3362—*
	+ At the conclusion of each internship rotation or throughout the rotation if the provider has arranged this with the VR Counselor; and
	+ Any time a change in the customer's needs or circumstances affect the customer's ability to continue participating in the internships;
* Complete the *VR3362,* documenting the following:
	+ Evidence that goals were established and addressed for the reporting period;
	+ Information describing the current internship;
	+ Date range of the start date, end date, and total hours provided during that date range;
	+ Summary of the services the skills trainer and Project SEARCH team provided and the customer's performance toward their goals for each date range entry;
	+ Affirmation that at least three hours of training were provided each week for the 8-12 week internship rotation; and
	+ Evidence that the customer's soft and hard skills were evaluated and scored during the internship.

### Job Placement

When the customer has participated in at least one internship rotation or, at any time during the rotations, the team determines job placement opportunities are available to the customer, the Job Placement Specialist and Project SEARCH team help the customer find employment.

The VR Counselor must attend the monthly steering committee meetings and the employment planning meetings each rotation to ensure that they are in regular communication with the Project SEARCH team and know when SAs are needed.

On a case-by-case basis, when the VR Counselor determines the provider should be paid for making a second placement, a *Contracted Service Modification Request (VR3472)* must be approved by the VR Director prior to the SA being issued.

The VR Counselor must–

* Meet with the customer, customer's legal guardian or representative (if applicable), and Project SEARCH team to complete the *VR3363—*
	+ To review and clarify employment-related support and training that the customer needs to find employment;
	+ To identify the customer's skills, abilities, experiences, training, education, attributes and/or barriers related to employment;
	+ To identify negotiable and nonnegotiable employment conditions; and
	+ To document the customer's identified employment goals and the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes and O'NET description of the job tasks/ responsibilities for each employment goal; and
	+ To indicate how services may be provided either in person, remotely, or a combination of both;
* Ensure TWC-VR staff send the SA for Benchmark A (SAs for Benchmarks B and C are sent after the customer achieves Benchmark A.).

The Contractor must–

* Attend meeting with the customer, customer's legal guardian or representative (if applicable), and Project SEARCH team to complete the *VR3363;*
* Ensure customer has worked for Benchmark A (five days), B (45 cumulative days), and C (90 cumulative days) in the same position with the same employer and that the job meets—
* 100% of the nonnegotiable employment conditions;
* At least 50% of the negotiable employment conditions;
	+ All six digits of one of the SOCs listed within the employment goals based on the job tasks the customer is performing, which are included in the O\*NET description (not based on the customer's job title); and
* Services delivered as indicated on VR3363; and
* For Benchmark C, accurately document on *Project SEARCH Placement Report (VR3364)* all extended services necessary for the customer to maintain long-term CIE after TWC-VR closes the case.

### Customer's Satisfaction

The customer's satisfaction and service delivery are verified by the customer's signature on the *VR3362*, *VR3363*, and *VR3364* or by a TWC-VR staff member’s contact with the customer, documented in a case note.

### Project SEARCH Payment

Payment for Project SEARCH is made to the contractor when the VR Counselor approves a complete, accurate, signed, and dated—

* Asset Discovery—
	+ *VR3361*; and
	+ The invoice.
* Skills Training—
	+ *VR3362*; and
	+ The invoice
* Job Placement Benchmarks A-C—
	+ *VR3363*;
	+ VR3364; and
	+ The invoice.

## APPROVALS & CONSULTATIONS

TWC-VR staff must follow the following approvals and consultations:

*Approvals*

* *VR Director approval is required for any request to change a Project SEARCH services, using the VR3472, prior to changes being implemented.*

*Consultations*

* *State Office Project SEARCH Coordinator (Program Specialist for Transition) consultation is required before any services may be provided remotely.*

## REVIEW

The Policy Planning and Statewide Initiatives Team, or designee, is responsible for reviewing this policy and these procedures and will update the Document History log if necessary.

| Date | Type | Change Description |
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| 9/3/2024 | New | VRSM Policy and Procedure Rewrite |