

Meet Craig Schield

Altoona Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (BVRs) District Administrator

Tell us about your career journey.

My career journey began in Wisconsin, where I was a vocational rehabilitation customer. Despite initial resistance from my VR counselor, who believed my deafness would be a barrier to pursuing higher education, I pushed forward. I was determined to break down barriers, and, with the support of my vocational rehabilitation program, I earned a bachelor's degree in political science from a small university in Wisconsin.



I became the first deaf student using American Sign Language (ASL) as a primary language in that environment, working closely with the institution to provide the accommodations I needed. After graduation, I was fortunate to serve on the Mayor's Commission on Disabilities, which opened the door to a policy specialist position within the city. This role allowed me to advocate for disability rights and train department heads on accessibility and inclusion. After earning my master's degree in rehabilitation counseling, I began my career in Pennsylvania as a rehabilitation counselor for the deaf in the Harrisburg office. I was later promoted to vocational rehabilitation specialist in central office. Eventually, I left the Commonwealth to work as a regional manager for the Department of Human Services in Minnesota. I returned to Labor and Industry as an assistant district administrator for the Altoona BVRs office, where I was subsequently promoted to district administrator. This department has always resonated with my passion for serving people with disabilities and promoting inclusive workplaces.

What do you like best about your job?

What I enjoy most about my work is the opportunity to make a meaningful impact in the lives of individuals with disabilities, particularly as a deaf person in a managerial role. My position allows me to demonstrate that success is achievable regardless of one's disability, serving as a powerful teaching moment for the community. By being visible in leadership, I can influence community leaders and challenge misconceptions about the capabilities of individuals with disabilities. My involvement in various boards, including the local workforce board, has given me a platform to advocate for inclusion and accessibility. I take great pride in showing that diverse perspective enriches our discussions and decision-making processes, ultimately leading to better outcomes for everyone. Each day, I have the privilege of working with dedicated professionals committed to breaking down barriers and creating opportunities for all. I love fostering a culture that not only encourages the professional growth of individuals with disabilities but also inspires our colleagues to recognize the value of inclusion. My roles allow me to turn challenges into opportunities, proving that, together, we can create an environment where everyone has the chance to thrive.

Who or what has helped you succeed in your career journey?

My success has been shaped by a powerful combination of resilience, unwavering support and groundbreaking accommodations. This Commonwealth has played a pivotal role by providing me with essential support, particularly in the form of sign language interpreters. Their commitment to ensuring that I have the resources I need to communicate effectively in a workplace where I am often the only deaf individual has been transformative. While interpreter services can be costly, the Commonwealth recognizes that investing in accessibility is not just an obligation but a pathway to unlocking potential. Additionally, I owe much of my success to remarkable mentors and leaders, particularly Ryan Hyde, who believed in my capabilities and provided guidance throughout my career. Under his leadership, I was empowered to take on challenging roles that allowed me to showcase my talents and drive change within the organization. The collaborative environment he fostered encouraged me to pursue my passion for advocacy, creating ripples of impact that extended far beyond my immediate role. With these experiences, I have learned that success isn't just about individual effort. It's about the collective support and opportunities we create for one another. My journey has been a testament to the incredible things that can happen when organizations prioritize inclusion and accessibility.

What advice do you have for job seekers with disabilities?

My advice for job seekers with disabilities is to harness your unique experiences as a source of strength. The journey may come with challenges, but your perspective is invaluable in a workforce that often lacks diversity. Never let someone else's narrow view of what you can achieve define your potential. You possess a wealth of skills and resilience that can drive innovation and change within any organization. Embrace your narrative and advocate for the accommodations you need to thrive. This might include technology that enhances your work or interpreters that facilitate communication. Don't hesitate to leverage resources like vocational rehabilitation programs, which can provide critical support and guidance tailored to your needs. Remember, the workforce needs your voice and your story. When you advocate for yourself, you pave the way for others in similar situations. It's not just about securing a job; it's about building a movement toward inclusivity that transforms workplaces for future generations. Your determination can inspire others and create a ripple effect, encouraging organizations to embrace value that people with disabilities bring to the table. Let your journey be a beacon of hope and empowerment for others navigating similar paths.

This year's NDEAM theme is Access to Good Jobs for All. What is one action you think others can do to help make a difference in this space?

One crucial step that employers and co-workers can take is to embrace a culture of inclusivity by ensuring accommodations are readily available without hesitation. Being proactive about accommodations not only supports employees with disabilities but also enhances the overall inclusiveness of the workplace.