**Showcasing the DNR: Unassuming heroes**

*DNR partnership with Michigan Rehabilitation Services rewarding and productive*

**By JOHN PEPIN**

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During the height of the coronavirus pandemic, with businesses, schools and churches closed, record numbers of people in Michigan began heading to the outdoors for recreation, exercise and relaxation.

In addition to increases in the number of hunters, anglers and off-road vehicle operators, the surge in visitors to Michigan’s 103 state parks strained the ability for park staff to keep up with demands on regular operations.

Even before the coronavirus hit, state park campers and day-use visitors totaled 28 million in 2019 – a new record. The following year visitation increased to 35 million, despite the parks not being staffed from March through June 2020.

“In 2019, campers booked a total of 1.2 million camp nights, including rustic and modern camping and lodging in state parks and state forest campgrounds across Michigan,” said Debbie Leisner, a Michigan Department of Natural Resources Parks and Recreation Division revenue specialist. “In 2020, the number decreased slightly to 1.1 million before setting a new record in 2021 at 1.4 million camp nights.”

Amid this backdrop of record visitation and the associated demands placed on the state’s park system, an unassuming group of heroes showed up on the scene, ready and able to work.

This was nothing new for them.

These secondary education students from Michigan Rehabilitation Services have been helping make state park operations run smoother for the past 15 years.

They did this despite challenges faced in the operation of their own program during the pandemic.

**Supporting structure**

The Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity’s [Michigan Rehabilitation Services](https://www.michigan.gov/leo/bureaus-agencies/mrs) is a state network of vocational rehabilitation professionals developing creative, customized solutions that meet the needs of program-eligible individuals with disabilities and businesses.

“We deliver individualized services that assist potential employees with differing abilities to prepare for, pursue and retain careers,” said Jennifer Hirst, a Michigan Rehabilitation Services rehabilitation consultant. “We partner with businesses to ensure we adequately prepare potential and qualified candidates to meet industry demand, including technical consultation and support regarding disability and employment-related factors. We are committed to building the workforce of tomorrow – today.”

The agency’s mission is to develop customized workforce solutions for businesses and individuals with disabilities. Its vision is a diverse and inclusive workforce that unites businesses and individuals with disabilities toward a common good.

In the case of the DNR, the agency works through local programs, intermediate school districts and regional educational services agencies to match students with disabilities aged 14-26 with paid work-based learning opportunities at the DNR.

The DNR provides the job site.

Working with the DNR offers participating students the opportunity to function as part of a team, valuable work and transition experience and connections with campers at Michigan state parks.

“This partnership promotes equity and inclusion and contributes to the overall mission of our work,” said Alexis Hermiz, DNR diversity, equity and inclusion officer. “The program highlights the abilities and contributions of participants and serves as an important connection to valuable work experience on their career pathways.”

Students are selected for the program jointly by Michigan Rehabilitation Services and local educators.

The program is funded through a mix of state and federal money.

**Putting the pieces in place**

Six to eight weeks before the start of work at the DNR, a preparation and planning phase takes place when all project leaders or designees meet for introductions and to define project details by site.

Student candidates get experience with filling out a mock application and developing a resume. Project leads and designees participate in candidate interviews and preseason safety training.

An orientation is provided for participants and parents to familiarize them with a range of topics, including expectations, attendance, safety, time keeping, emergency medical forms, releases, dress, insect protection, et cetera.

“We urge our staff to foster a positive and energetic attitude right from the start of the work experience, understanding that the first few days of transition to work can be challenging for some of the student participants,” said Doug Rich, DNR Parks and Recreation Division western Upper Peninsula district supervisor and liaison for Michigan Rehabilitation Services. “We thank them for joining our summer team, hold team-building exercises, congratulate them for a job well-done and hold a celebration ceremony at the end of the experience.”

Job crews typically consist of roughly a half-dozen students working under the supervision of a job coach. Crews work four hours each day, up to five days a week. The crews start work from mid-June to mid-August.

Projects range from repairing picnic tables, splitting firewood, and boardwalk or stair repair or removal to washing windows and screens, putting up signs and checking or mending fences.

Tasks the students perform including raking and cleaning beach debris, brushing and clearing hiking trails, cleaning parking lot islands, assisting with the fishing and camper coffee programs and other opportunities to interact with the public, grounds maintenance, and cleaning in and around showers and other outbuildings.

“We receive great feedback from the public,” Rich said. “The increase in the DNR workforce leads to more projects being completed during the peak season. Positive improvements to facilities, in turn, leads to enhanced visitor experiences.”

**Sites and statistics**

The DNR’s involvement with the program began at Traverse City State Park in 2008, with eight students from the local intermediate school district participating.

From 2008 to 2010, the program expanded to include Interlochen State Park. In 2010, the DNR met with Michigan Rehabilitation Services to expand participation and gain federal funding for the program. By 2012, several state forest campgrounds had been added to the list of job sites.

In 2013, the program expanded statewide with marked increases in the number of state parks job sites, students participating and funding streams. By 2017, 335 students participated in the program at 44 state parks across Michigan.

During the 2021 summer season, Porcupine Mountains Wilderness, F.J. McLain, Baraga, Van Riper, Brimley, Tahquamenon Falls and Twin Lakes state parks participated in the Upper Peninsula.

In the Lower Peninsula, state parks involved included Cheboygan, Wilderness, Petoskey, Young, Fish Island, Traverse City, Orchard Beach, Ludington, Mears, Grand Haven, Newago, Holland, Van Buren, Dodge Park No. 4, Sleepy Hollow, Milliken, Sterling, Warren Dunes and the Bay City, Pontiac Lake and Holly recreation areas.

In 2018, to improve administrative efficiency, an interagency agreement was put in place to leverage state funding from the DNR Parks and Recreation Division and Michigan Rehabilitation Services to capture federal matching funds.

That year, 269 students participated statewide, with 275 the following year. Ninety-two percent of those who began the program in both of those years finished. In 2019, 28 education agencies and 17 Michigan Rehabilitation Services offices across Michigan were involved.

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic had a significant impact on the program, with the number of student participants dropping to 54, maintaining a 91% completion rate and the number of state park job sites dropped to 14. Eight education agencies and Michigan Rehabilitation Services offices were involved.

State funding for the program correspondingly dropped during this time. With the interagency agreement remaining in place, the program continued to acquire federal matching funds for the program.

“Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, parks were still dedicated to providing a summer work experience,” Rich said. “If it wasn’t for the summer work experience, DNR sites may have not been able to maintain the parks with the then-influx of visitors.”

In a survey based on the summer’s experience, 78% of DNR, education and LEO personnel said the Michigan Rehabilitation Services project was something they would recommend.

**High marks**

Educators, DNR employees and Michigan Rehabilitation Services staffers provided comments in the 2020 survey, indicating continued multiple values to the program for all parties involved.

In responses, after being asked what was most positive about the program, one education partner said they had 10 students completing the program that summer.

“For many students, this was their first paid work experience. Parents were thrilled for their young adults to have the opportunity,” the respondent said, saying some past participants had found future success. “…We had four former DNR youth work summer workers who were employed by the DNR at a state park this summer. That is awesome and speaks to the quality of the experience.”

A DNR supervisor said they like seeing the participants grow as the season goes on.

“They gain some great work experience, but the most positive thing they gain is the social skills," the supervisor said. "Our staff also gain from the program by working side-by-side with them."

Another liked “the smiles on the faces of the students after accomplishing a project/task/.”

A program counselor said the DNR arranged for a central place to report to work at one park that also provided bikes for the students.

The most positive thing for that respondent was “community members commenting directly to students how their work improved the park.”

Another said, “Even though the program was shortened due to COVID-19, participants were excited to engage in the work experience. Job coaches and park staff were extremely supportive, and I received a lot of positive feedback from everyone involved.”

This is the time of the year when new student candidates are being sought for the program to work at state parks this summer.

If you’re visiting a state park this summer, chances are good you might see some of these capable and motivated, unassuming student heroes at work.

They’ll be there helping to make your state park experience everything you hope it will be. Offering a kind word or an acknowledgement of a job well-done may just make their state park experience everything they hope it will be too.

For more information on the summer youth work program, visit: [Michigan.gov/MRS](http://www.Michigan.gov/MRS).

Check out previous Showcasing the DNR stories in our archive at [Michigan.gov/DNRStories](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79137_79770_79873_80003---,00.html). To subscribe to upcoming Showcasing articles, sign up for free email delivery at [Michigan.gov/DNR](http://www.Michigan.gov/DNR).

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