

Keep on rolling

VR helps bus drivers stay on the job

Cecelia Maples was having trouble “walking the bus.” “Walking the bus” refers to making a safety check of a school bus that includes checking all lights, ensuring all equipment is functioning properly, and examining the interior and exterior of the vehicle for damage. Drivers perform this check at least four times a day.

Cecelia has been a school bus driver for the Kershaw County School District for 14 years and loves her job. But she had been having difficulty walking for almost two years, and it was getting worse. Now it was affecting her job.

“I could barely walk and when I did, it was just agonizing pain,” she says. “If I can’t walk my bus and I can’t sit down and drive the bus, then I’m going to be out of a job.”

Around this time she attended an inservice meeting for county bus drivers at the beginning of the school year. Amid the usual information was a presentation she describes as “something special.”

Robbie Truesdale, Client Services Specialist from the SC Vocational Rehabilitation Department (VR), spoke about some of the challenges that drivers might be facing, such as knee, shoulder or back pain; hypertension; diabetes; or stress and anxiety; and how these could impact their jobs. He then explained how the services offered by VR could help them overcome those challenges.

“When I heard what VR offers, I was like, ‘Oh wow!’” says Cecelia. “I didn’t realize all that they can help you with.”

She immediately called the Camden Area Office and explained her situation to Summer Rigby, Area Supervisor. Rigby arranged for Cecelia to see a specialist to determine why she was in so much pain. It turned out that the tissue connecting the heel bone to the toes in Cecelia’s feet had signs of collagen degeneration and disorganization, a condition called plantar fasciitis. It is a persistent form of repetitive strain injury caused by chronic irritation of the arch of the foot due to excessive strain.

A VR rehabilitation technology engineer then worked with Cecelia to provide an ergonomic back support



Cecelia Maples, Kershaw County school bus driver.

and seat cushion for her bus, custom inserts for her shoes, and splints that she wears at night. He also built a custom support for her after evaluating her driving routine.

“I told him how I sit on the bus, how my left leg relaxes, and that I was still having problems with it.” The engineer built a small, slanted box that Cecelia places her left foot on while driving. It helps her maintain proper posture. “He also built it so that I can turn it sideways when I’m not using it and slide it out of the way. Nobody knows it’s there but me.”

Truesdale says that more than 15 drivers contacted the Camden Office after that first meeting. “We were able to help almost everyone maintain their job. For the few who were unable to continue as a bus driver, we worked with them to find alternative employment.”

Truesdale was following in the steps of Rachel Nash, Business Development Specialist for the Rock Hill Area Office, who began working with school bus drivers in York County almost six years ago. After seeing how some drivers were struggling to maintain their jobs, she reached out to transportation administrators and explained how VR services could help them reduce turnover rates and retain valuable employees. As a result, more than 40 drivers have received VR services over the years, and the Rock Hill Office has begun assisting drivers in Chester County.

Richard Podmore, former Transportation Coordinator for York School District One and now Director of Safety and Information for the SC Department of Education Office of Transportation, recently had Nash speak to the technicians and shop personnel from around the state who service school buses.

“She is helping the technicians in the same way she has helped bus drivers,” he says. “I had a number of them reach out to me and say how much they have appreciated getting this information. If a technician or

a driver cannot pass a Department of Transportation physical, they are out of a job. By providing the services that these individuals need, VR has helped them remain employed.”

Podmore was one of the first to work with Nash to provide assistance for the drivers. She says that he and other supervisors care strongly about their employees and want to provide resources to help them be successful.

“These folks want to work,” says Podmore. “Their love and livelihood is working on, or driving, buses. Both jobs require a commercial driver’s license, which also requires a physical. VR helps people stay employed and does that quite well. And if it happens that someone cannot keep their job as a driver or a mechanic, VR can help them with training and resources so they can do something else.”

Each side benefits, says Truesdale. “The employer, the employee and VR are working together to make sure the employee is successful.”

For Cecelia, it has meant that she has been able to keep her job, and more.

“I don’t feel limited now. I can get out and do the things that I used to do. I’ve started walking again—I even bought walking shoes!” she says with a big smile.



Vocational Rehabilitation

Let's go to work