

# SUCCESS STORY— E1MN COLLABORATION



Professional spotlight:  
Serena Robak, waiver case manager



E1MN is Minnesota's state agency partnership to advance Employment First outcomes for youth and adults with disabilities.

## Collaboration in Kandiyohi

How E1MN makes a waiver case manager's job easier and advances Employment First outcomes



Shortly after E1MN launched in 2021, Serena Robak started noticing how closer collaboration between professionals who support employment makes her job easier and leads to better outcomes for people and families.

For Serena, a waiver case manager in Kandiyohi County, the changes show up in ways big and small. She feels more confident discussing employment with people she supports and knows the right person to contact at nearby agencies to coordinate about someone they both serve. Serena also notices how better-coordinated services improve people's overall quality of life and reduce stress on families.

"We can talk to each other now in a language we understand," Serena said of collaboration between waiver case managers, Vocational Rehabilitation Services/State Services for the Blind (VRS/SSB) staff and employment service providers. "It just keeps people from falling through the cracks."

Serena's commitment to helping others sparked a decades-long career in public service, eventually leading her to [waiver case management](#). She's passionate about ensuring people and families know they're not alone and helping them find services in a complicated system.

"My heart is in this work," Serena said. "I'm that kind of person, that

kind of case manager, where I think the more people you can bring to the table at one time, the better it prevents miscommunication, duplication of work and headaches for people and families."

### WHAT IS E1MN?

[E1MN](#) is a way of working together to deliver a coordinated employment support system so people with disabilities know their options and get what they need to make an informed choice about competitive integrated employment. The state launched E1MN in 2021 after several years of planning and listening to people with disabilities, their families

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and professionals who support them. The partnership includes the Minnesota departments of Education, Human Services and Employment and Economic Development.

Collaboration breaks down barriers between the different parts of the disability services system, helping professionals do their work better and streamlining the experience for people and families. The E1MN partnership developed the [Engage, Plan, Find, Keep framework](#) to support collaboration between professionals. The framework shows how waiver and VRS/SSB services [support people at different places on the path to employment](#). They also created the [Disability Hub MN Work Toolkit](#), which includes resources and [hands-on tools](#) for supporting employment and applying the framework. The state agencies have led trainings, held regional meetings of professionals and provided ongoing technical assistance to help professionals make [Employment First](#) a reality.

### E1MN BUILDS RELATIONSHIPS, UNDERSTANDING AND COORDINATION

Serena joined the trainings and attended the regional meetings to connect with local VRS/SSB staff and employment service providers. Kandiyohi County also independently hosted meetings with providers who work in the region. These touchpoints—a level of collaboration Serena hadn’t experienced before—brought professionals across the system together to learn, build relationships, understand each other’s roles and coordinate how to partner more closely.

“I did all the trainings, so I had the foundation,” Serena said. “But I think it’s once you make those connections, right? You see the faces, you get the names, you get the phone number or the email, and then you can really start doing something.”

After getting past the initial learning curve, Serena now finds

that E1MN collaboration helps her do her job better and makes her work easier. She’s also noticed how it improves outcomes for the people she supports.

### *Helps Serena do her job better*

E1MN has made Serena feel more certain of her role in helping people get a job and more confident spending time with people on their work goals. Before the changes, Serena focused on health and safety, viewing employment as someone else’s responsibility. Now she feels better equipped to discuss employment and raises it more often. Referrals feel like sending people she supports to a trusted partner—not into the unknown.

One such partner is Karen Rosman-Bangasser, a senior rehabilitation counselor with VRS in Kandiyohi County. Collaboration is a natural fit for Karen from years of working on large teams as an administrator at residential group homes. Though keeping multiple professionals on the same page can be challenging, Karen said it helps her work more efficiently and reduces delays for the people she supports. She strives to know the different contacts from partner agencies, their styles and how to prepare best when working together. “It’s important to collaborate in order for the person to get the best outcome,” she explained.

### *Makes Serena’s job easier*

Collaboration saves time, reduces duplication of work and allows Serena to connect the people she supports to services more easily than she could before. When she needs to chat with another



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## STEPPING BACK: FOCUSING ON CARLA'S HOLISTIC QUALITY OF LIFE

*Please note: Carla has been used in place of the person's real name.*

Serena's favorite E1MN success story starts with an email from Karen at VRS. Always collaborative, Karen reached out about Carla, a recent high school graduate they both support. Carla loves working at a horse camp during the summer, and her mother asked VRS for help exploring employment for the rest of the year.

Carla wasn't very excited about other work, and navigating the system was taking a toll on her mother, who had to juggle her own job and the rest of Carla's services. After connecting, Serena and Karen exchanged information and worked to get on the same page. They held conference calls with Carla and her mother to discuss what to do.

After the second call, they decided to put job exploration on hold for now to focus on Carla's other needs, but they plan to come back to it soon. Serena has already noticed a remarkable difference—in their last meeting, Carla was more engaged, and her mother shared her gratitude.

"It just makes the system more cohesive and more friendly—less intimidating," Serena said of E1MN collaboration. "Carla is in such a better place, and I hope we'll be back with VRS in six months. We all came to agreement, and Mom didn't have to try to explain everything to everybody, not knowing the system."

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—Serena Robak, waiver case manager

professional about a person they both support, she just reaches out. If Serena isn't sure whom to contact, she can check with the [VRS/SSB waiver liaison](#) to find the right person. VRS/SSB created this new role to make it easier for waiver case managers and service providers to connect with them when needed, while the Department of Human Services asked each lead agency to identify a corresponding person to be their employment liaison.

"My job is easier because I can quickly and easily connect a person I support with services they need in a way I could not do before, that I was enabled to do only because of E1MN," she said. "And that, in turn, doubly makes my job easier because their needs are met in areas I can't meet."

### **Improves outcomes for people Serena supports**

To Serena, employment improves people's holistic quality of life, which can affect physical health, mental well-being and family life. Through collaboration, she can provide information to other professionals that they might not otherwise have. She believes this approach can help reduce crises and the need for interventions in the future, benefiting the person and making her job easier.

### **'TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE OPPORTUNITY TO COLLABORATE'**

Serena plans to keep building on the positive changes E1MN collaboration has had on her work and the lives of the people she supports. A learner at heart, she intends to dig into the hands-on tools and resources available on Disability Hub MN. Serena also wants to document her county's progress around collaboration so it's sustainable and resilient even with staff turnover.

Looking beyond her agency, Serena hopes to resume meetings with local providers to strengthen coordination and identify new ways to work together. She would also appreciate annual state-led regional meetings to refresh professionals on the goals of E1MN, share promising practices and continue building connections.

"Embrace it," Serena suggested to fellow professionals across Minnesota. "Take advantage of the opportunity to collaborate."

### **LEARN MORE**

- Browse this [E1MN overview](#)
- Review [E1MN training materials](#)
- Submit questions or feedback through the [E1MN request form](#)