

N.J. Commission for the Blind & Visually Impaired (CBVI)
State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)

Meeting Minutes – June 4, 2021 (virtual meeting)

Voting Members Present: Pamela Aasen, Ida Behreini, Vito DeSantis, Alice Eaddy, Jonathan Goodman, Clarke King, William Robinson, Kathleen Spata, Evangelia Stone

Members Awaiting Appointment: Bill Freeman, Sheryl Hutchison, John O’Connell, Charles Ouslander, Ronda Williams

Absent: Don Campbell, Wanda Williford

Ex Officio Present: Bernice Davis, Kathleen Donnellon, John Tkacz

Staff/Members of Public Present: Amanda Gerson, Pat McKenna, Linda Melendez

Lia Stone, SRC Chairperson, welcomed everyone, calling the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m. She announced the meeting was being held in compliance with Section 105 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act 1973 as amended; also in compliance with the New Jersey Open Public Meeting Act, NJSA 10:4-6.

Approval of Meeting Minutes

The minutes of February 5, 2021 meeting were reviewed. A motion to accept the minutes was made by Kathleen Spata, and seconded by Vito DeSantis; all were in favor. These meeting minutes will be put into the permanent record of the SRC.

Remaining 2021 Meeting Dates: October 1, December 3

Linda Melendez, President of the NJ National Federation of the Blind was welcomed to today’s meeting.

Pat McKenna reported that he stepped down from his position on the SRC a week ago, and is attending today’s meeting as a member of the public.

Dr. Davis thanked Pat for his years of service on the SRC, and for all his work with the EDGE program at the Family Resource Network. Dr. Davis presented Pat with a certificate, signed by her and Evangelia Stone, to demonstrate their appreciation for his dedication to the SRC.

Dr. Davis also announced that Pat will be joining CBVI, as an Assistant Division Director; effective July 31. Pat will primarily be responsible for the Vocational Rehabilitation programs. His office will be located at 153 Halsey Street, Newark.

Dr. Davis offered her congratulations to Pat, and noted she is looking forward to welcoming him on-board at the Agency. Lia also thanked Pat for the great work he did as a member of the SRC. Pat thanked them both for their kind words, and for the Certificate of Appreciation. He commented that he very much enjoyed being part of the SRC over the last several years. He noted that it's been a privilege to get to work with everyone on the SRC and he appreciated the contributions the SRC has made over the last several years. He noted that he enjoyed his work on the Policy & Procedure sub-committee; reviewing and looking over all of the various policies and procedures; he thanked Ida for all her assistance on this committee. Dr. Davis noted that Pat will continue to be a presence at the SRC, not as a voting member, but as part of the CBVI staff.

Any SRC member with a nomination to fill Pat's seat on the SRC was encouraged to submit it to Amanda Gerson by June 8. The nominee would need to be employed by a Community Rehabilitation Program Provider contracted with CBVI to deliver services to CBVI consumers.

Dr. Bernice Davis – Executive Director's Report

- Ines Matos, Chief of Logistics and Management Information Systems, is retiring effective June 30. Ines has been with CBVI for 30+ years, and will be sorely missed. Looking to backfill this very important position; it is interwoven into all of our programs inclusive of VR.
- 2 additional Assistant Division Director positions will be filled. These positions will give direct attention to the managers/directors, and relieve the Executive Director in terms of running the operations of the Agency.
- Randolph Sheppard Program and blind managers: The pandemic negatively impacted their livelihood. Received notice from the Federal Government (Rehabilitation Services Administration – RSA), that our proposal for relief restoration has received approval. Financial relief restoration fund for New Jersey, is \$498,500; this is based upon the number of vendors. Thank you and congratulations to the elected committee of blind vendors, as well as to Deacon Truesdale and his team, who worked very hard, in partnership, to get this proposal approved.
- SRC By- Laws: Waiting for feedback from the Department of Human Services; hopefully will hear back prior to the next meeting.
- JKTC continues to provide virtual programming for consumers. Logistically there's a lot going on with the Center. The City of New Brunswick has decided to repair the sidewalks; we're happy that's being done as part of a massive city project. A few upgrades are also being done: changing some of the flooring, taking up the carpet, wall panels to be replaced. Also, received funds to have two looping systems installed. This is for those consumers who are hard of hearing/deaf. This system will be installed in our meeting rooms. Hopefully these projects will be completed over the next 4-6 weeks. Also, working on plans to implement some form of on-site programming.

- Agency programming update: Orientation & Mobility (O&M) staff, as well as the Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVI) are conducting virtual services as well as itinerant services; they've been back in the field for approximately a month now. Eye health nurses and Project BEST students will also be returning to itinerant services, for those persons requesting it and not benefiting from virtual.

Amanda Gerson – Vocational Rehabilitation Report

- Corrective Action Plan (CAP): CBVI, federally monitored by RSA, was audited in 2018. In 2019 we received the monitoring report, which had some compliance findings we needed to address. We have been working hard for the past 18 months to check off about a third of our findings so far, and submitted for resolution. We did get a finding for the length of time in which it takes someone to go from application to eligibility, which is a maximum of 60 days. We implemented a range of quality assurance strategies and activities and tracking, and monitoring and case reviews, and did some retraining. Created some new policies. Very proud of the counselors that they really pulled it off; we have met two consecutive quarters of 90 plus percent compliance. Most of the remaining findings have to do with the need to coordinate and network with other state and federal agencies; making good progress. Optimistic of having the CAP resolved by the end of the year.
- CBVI was selected from a competitive application process to participate in a progressive employment learning collaborative with the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) at U Mass, Boston; the project is funded by a grant. CBVI's Business Relations Unit (BRU) is taking the lead on this, and will be working to implement a progressive employment pilot in the southern half of NJ; eventually statewide. We are excited to implement a more formal progressive employment program in New Jersey. Amanda will send link to a site that outlines the progressive employment model. Vito wanted to provide full disclosure; although he works for ICI, he is not involved with this collaborative.
- Consumers continue to receive virtual services from counselors. We are looking forward to eventually getting back into the field, but for now we've been able to meet most of our consumers' needs in a virtual environment.
- Summer programs: All three of our primary summer programs will be virtual again this year; great enrollment for all three programs. Work Skills Prep (24 registered clients) and College Prep Experience (16 registered clients) are run by the College of New Jersey; those programs start June 28; full capacity for both. Also have the Life 101 Program, run out of our Joseph Kohn Training Center; 2 students on a waitlist for that program.
- The BRU recently did a presentation at the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB), to highlight the work the BRU is doing. Amazon hires are very impressive; 20 in the past 2 years. We have regional and statewide contacts with

Amazon, including in their HR and accommodations offices that specialize in accommodations for folks with visual impairments. They've been super open to providing accommodations, finding solutions, and finding work assignments within the different distribution centers and warehouses that meet the needs of each consumer that is hired. Overall, seeing an uptick in the past few months of activity with businesses looking to restart their hiring process

Dr. Davis offered congratulations to Amanda and the BRU team for the NCSAB presentation last month. The theme for the Spring conference was resilience and reinvention and the BRU gave a very successful and well received presentation. Amanda also thanked Ida for her participation on the panel. Ida talked about her experience of going from a traditional in-office employee, to a work from home employee; she did a fabulous job.

Clarke King asked about the Agency's policy on equipment issued to consumers. Amanda explained that the Agency provides equipment to individuals while they are engaged in a training program. If someone is in a short term training program, typically under a year, they get a loaner laptop. Once they finish their training program they would need to give it back. Similarly, loaner equipment is given when somebody is participating in assistive technology training, so they can use and practice with the equipment. Unfortunately, we don't have an unlimited number of computers in our loaner program and we can't provide equipment to everyone in the VR Program; we need to reclaim the computers back once people are finished with their active training, so that others can also benefit from the service. Katie Donnellon added that there is another resource that has computers for the blind; it's an organization out of Texas; if the person is on Social Security they can get a computer at a discounted rate and it has adaptive software on it. Katie offered to get information on this resource to Clarke. Amanda noted that CBVI also always seeks to identify resources for consumers; there are accessible computers at libraries around the State at CBVI's LEAP locations. Job developers assist by helping put in applications; we look to provide other referrals and resources to individuals so they can take advantage of what is within their budget.

SRC Members' Reports

Lia reminded everyone to email their report (bulleted points) to Chris Cooper. At this point of the meeting, members of the SRC were asked to provide their report on relevant issues and happenings from the community/group/employer they represent.

Pamela Aasen (Parent Training & Information Center Representative):

Deaf mentor program held a training last weekend. During the snapshot provider portion of the program, which provides individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf blind, the opportunity to meet with parents to answer questions about their experiences. In that training there were two deaf blind male individuals. Pamela noted they will be able to offer that to more participants.

Charles Ouslander (Client Assistance Program Representative):

The National Disability Rights Network and other Protection & Advocacies have been in discussion with RSA regarding policy directives (re: financial contributions of Social Security recipients and student loans), which were removed during the last administration. They are likely to be revised and placed back up on their website. This has been an ongoing conversation with RSA for some time.

Katie Donnellon (Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Representative):

Positive outcomes with Amazon employment: Katie described the positive experience one of her clients has been having. She reported that Amazon worked with our orientation and mobility person, who has gone to the work location to help the client orient himself to the warehouse. They have purchased tactile tape that they've put on the floor and he uses his cane to find his station, the lunch room, the bathrooms, an emergency exit, and the front door. This way he can find his way around the warehouse and be totally independent. Katie explained some of the other systems being put in place to assist. She has been in constant contact with the HR person at Amazon with any issues that arise. The Commission provided the client with a job coach too, who was there for him from the beginning; weaning off at this time. Katie noted that this is the second person she has had with Amazon; both have had a very good experience.

Kathleen Spata (Community Rehabilitation Program Provider):

SSP services continue to successfully be provided virtually to a large number of consumers. Primarily, virtual support with phone calls and zoom calls; also a big one is on-line food shopping; and even some social support groups; have also been supporting consumers with their I Can Connect training. Continuing to work with our partners at CBVI to prepare and discuss plans of returning back to in-person services.

Dr. Davis wanted to make everyone aware that Deaf Blind Awareness Week is June 27 through July 3. In addition, she wanted everyone to know that Kathleen will be presenting at an upcoming NFB information fair. Kathleen commented it will be a great opportunity for seniors who live with deaf blindness, as well as consumers who have been approved for SSP services and may be not sure of how the services can be used/virtually used; how they can really benefit and utilize the service to enhance their independence. Amanda thanked Kathleen, and Carly also, who will be giving a brief presentation.

Jon Goodman (Business & Industry Representative):

Jonathan left the meeting prior to reporting.

Ronda Williams (Business & Industry Representative):

VEHICLE CAPACITY INCREASE

Looking to increase vehicle capacity from 75% to 100% Mid-June

TOLL FREE- 800#

New Telephone Number- Officially Retired as of April 5th. Announcements for New Telephone number shared internally and externally via email, PASS WEB Messages and Phone System. Vehicle posters have been ordered. Callers when dialing the 800# will now receive a message to disconnect the call and try the new number (973) 491-4224.

VAXRIDE PROGRAM:

Effective Tuesday, May 4th, NJ TRANSIT launched a program for customers to ride for free when going to take the COVID-19 vaccination. This program is call VAXRIDE, which provides Access Link customers two (2) free round trips or four (4) one way trips for COVID-19 vaccination. Stats are currently being tracked and reported daily.

THE MOBILE APP

Access Link mobile app downloads are increasing weekly. We are nearing 3,000 downloads.

SOCIAL MEDIA

We still encourage customer/callers to follow us on TWITTER. Use the current technology: Access Link Online and the mobile app for reservations, cancellations and monitoring of vehicle arrival. Also encourage use of EZ-Wallet and WHERE'S MY RIDE.

REDUCED FARE LEGISLATION

Once again, Any Access Link customer who has not received a card can call 800.955.2321 and take option #1 for the Certification Group. A Rep would be able to assist them or direct them to the Reduced Fare Card Department.

OUTREACH EVENTS

If anyone have any events that we can attend to expand our outreach efforts. Can you please let us know? I can be reached at rwilliams@njtransit.com

William Robinson (Business & Industry Representative):

The National Association of Black Merchants held a training for the restaurant restoration program; very informative. The Committee of Blind Managers has been doing a good job in answering questions also. We're just about at the halfway point now with everyone being vaccinated; hopefully this continues and we can put our blind managers back to work and move forward.

Ida Behreini (Advocacy Group: Representative of a Disability):

No updates to share.

Lia Stone (Current or former VR applicant or recipient):

A lot of college students have been struggling with virtual learning, as have K-12 students. Happy to report most of the colleges in New Jersey will be back in-person in the fall. At this point, at least one college is mandating vaccines for students who are going to be on campus; Also, a couple of the southern-most counties in the state, as of today, will have no more contact tracers.

Clarke King (Current or former VR applicant or recipient):

During the pandemic it has been extremely challenging for 40-50 year-old consumers who have lost their vision over the last 2 years to have virtual training; in-person training is very important for these individuals. Clarke noted he has spoken to many of them, who were not born blind and have worked a good part of their lives, this is a very challenging time for them. Clarke also suggested that the question counselors ask to a consumer when services first start, of whether or not they want to work, be revisited after some training is provided. Many of them don't think they can work and they're still dealing with the emotional trauma of vision loss.

Amanda thanked Clarke for his feedback; she will take his observations and feedback back to CBVI's managers and Independent Living Coordinator as a reminder to the Independent Living staff to revisit that question a little bit more regularly. Vito noted that this is a perfect example of someone who might benefit from progressive employment.

Alice Eaddy (Current or former VR applicant or recipient):

Working on plans for the National Federation of the Blind's national convention. This year's (free) event will be virtual; accommodation requests accepted at registration. Alice noted she will share the agenda once completed.

Bill Freeman (State Education Agency Representative):

- Annual Dare to Dream student leadership conferences will be held virtually on October 8, 15, and 29; dates are being given as a heads-up to begin to prepare students to be presenters; always looking for talented keynote speakers. The conferences are really all about students presenting to other students, and the theme is self-advocacy; it's been a great series of conferences over the years; we also have breakout sessions or other displays of talents.
- Department of Education has been collaborating with CBVI and VR on our pre-employment transition and services trainings. Those trainings continue and will continue into the fall at various conferences and events; want to spread the word about pre-employment transition services.

Vito DeSantis (Representative of an Individual who is Blind):

- Awaiting the DHS feedback on the SRC By-Laws.
- Reauthorization - definition of a competitive integrated employment by WIOA. Controversial issue since 2014. This, especially, deals with individuals with significant disabilities. It's going to be interesting to see if there will be any changes to the definition. Vito commented that he has been hearing there might be some movement towards refining. He explained that the argument against it is that it cuts down on employment opportunities for a lot of people. On the other hand, it really deals with the issue of equality; right for employment for people with disabilities.

Clarke commented on a bill that's being introduced into the House regarding competitive integrate of employment for people with disabilities and removing the voucher system; paying people with disabilities equal and competitive wages and merging them into the competitive workforce. He offered to send Vito a copy of the information he has on this bill.

John Tkacz (Representative for the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services):

- DVRS continues to provide full services, primarily remote and virtual, for consumers.
- A six-week summer paid internship notice of grant went out and 15 contracts were awarded covering all the counties. It includes work readiness, training, and work based learning experience.
- DVRS will be vetting fee-for-service vendors for Social Security benefits planning specialists for benefit counseling. The goal is for new consumers to learn the advantage of working and earning income and not fear losing their insurance and check. It's similar to the Ticket to Work. The consumers will learn first-hand what their benefits will look like, if they start working, and not fear that they would lose benefits.

Introduction from the newest members of the SRC:

Sheryl Hutchison, Deputy Executive Director for the State Employment and Training, Commission (NJ SETC), commented that she is looking forward to serving on this Council. Ms. Hutchison reported she has worked on the State Workforce Plan together with Ms. Gerson and Dr. Davis, and really appreciated the CBVI partnership. The next project will be to update the local Workforce Development Board plans. New workforce plans and strategies to be developed; would like CBVI to be part of that guidance development; looking for greater coordination and integration with the local workforce boards and programs. Ms. Hutchison commented she is looking forward to collaborating.

John O'Connell thanked everyone for the warm welcome as he awaits appointment to the SRC. John noted that he represents blind veterans, and shared a little bit about himself. He was a pilot in the US Air Force and also had an airline career. He retired from the airlines when he was diagnosed with RP. John noted that he appreciates the opportunity to be a member of the SRC and looks forward to working with everyone, hoping to serve the blind veteran community, particularly in Ocean County. He also noted the opportunity to serve other veterans who are disabled, maybe not visually impaired. Unfortunately, Ocean County has a fairly high population of young veterans that are homeless and trying to find their way. John commented that some of the things he learns here, he can pass on. John also reported that he is speaking at the June 8 Senior Deaf Blind workshop, put on by the National Federation of the Blind. He thanked Dr. Davis for putting his name forward for this opportunity; and is honored to speak to that community about getting out there and living their life. Amanda thanked John and offered to answer any questions he may have. She noted there are not many referrals from the VA or veterans; obviously, this is an underserved population. Amanda commented she is looking forward to working with John to connect veterans to CBVI services.

Sub-Committee Reports:

- Business Engagement Committee: Jonathan Goodman, Chairperson, had left the meeting early; no report submitted.
- Policy and Procedure Committee: Since Pat is no longer a voting member of the SRC, Lia noted that this committee needs a new chairperson. She commented that Ida expressed an interest, and asked if anyone else would be interested. Although he wouldn't want to chair, Vito offered his assistance on the committee. Lia thanked Vito for the offer.
- Quality Assurance Committee: Clarke King, Chairperson, reported that this committee has met twice with Dr. Michelle Whitmore, CBVI's Quality Assurance Coordinator, since the last SRC meeting. Dr. Whitmore explained the auditing process and the training recommendations that take place to stay in RSA compliance. Also discussed and provided recommendations regarding the Vocational Rehabilitation handbook. The sub-committee recommended including the federal rule/mandate of those services. At the second meeting we discussed ways to increase IP compliance. One of the issues is a final sign off, the signature by the consumer. Clarke suggested that peer support groups could get the word out and stress the importance of getting signatures. The sub-committee thought the QA reports were very comprehensive; very confident of the monitoring process.
- SRC Annual Report Committee: Amanda Gerson noted that she would like to start work on the annual report this summer, and will schedule a meeting for some time in July. She asked for volunteers; more SRC ownership and control over how the information is presented is needed for this year's report. She explained that the annual report is a required report from RSA; it is a report of the performance and programs, and services of the Commission. Typically, there's a set of required performance data that is pulled from our case management system; we provide summaries of our programs. The most impactful component are the success stories, which shows the impact that CBVI can make, and the successes that consumers have throughout their process. This committee is open to different ideas and strategies to make it a little bit fresher and to show what it is that we do. The report is sent to RSA and the Governor, as a requirement; also, the Agency will typically publish it, as an information and marketing tool.

Old/New Business

Amanda discussed the need to form a Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) sub-committee. She noted the last Assessment was submitted last fall, so we have another two years; however, will need to start some activities over the next two years. She explained that every three years, the VR agencies around the country are required to go through a CSNA; its purpose is to look around at the consumers served, who might be underserved, and see whether or not we're able to provide the full scope of services, or if there's any additional services that are needed. Typically, there's a consumer and staff satisfaction survey; there are focus groups of a number of different consumer groups and stakeholders; informational interviews to get

targeted information from individuals of interest that we think can contribute. The CSNA identifies the strengths, weaknesses, and gaps around the services that we provide. That information is used to then inform the Agency's goals and our State Plan. The CSNA is supposed to have the active involvement of the SRC and Amanda noted she is looking forward to working with a subcommittee. Amanda noted that Ida, Jon, and Lia assisted last time. Additional volunteers are needed for this committee. Vito and Pamela offered their assistance. Amanda commented that if everyone wants to think about it and nominate themselves or others to chair it, or wants to be on the committee, please contact her. She can send out some advanced information; there's a manual that goes along with how to create a model CSNA, to anyone who wants to learn more and/or prep for our start in the fall.

SRC Goals and Priorities: Each year the SRC establishes what it is they want to focus on; their goals and priorities. Amanda noted that in the past it's been around compliance; it's about outreach, supporting the development of business engagement, supporting the engagement of work with transition age students. Vito suggested that he could continue looking at the issue of business relations and business engagement as a goal. Bill suggested to keep a focus on pre-employment transition and services for students. Amanda also suggested the SRC could have a role in outreach.

Lia reminded everyone to submit a bulleted summary of their meeting report to Chris Cooper prior/immediately following each meeting. In addition, please confirm your current contact information with Chris; i.e. phone number and email address, so that she can update the contact list.

Adjournment

Pamela Aasen made a motion to adjourn the meeting; the motion was seconded by William Robinson; all were in favor. The meeting was adjourned by 12 noon.

Lia thanked everyone for their participation at today's meeting, and wished everyone a great summer.

The next SRC meeting is scheduled for October 1, 2021.

Respectfully Submitted,

Christine Cooper

Christine Cooper
CBVI – Administrative Assistant