

N.J. Commission for the Blind & Visually Impaired (CBVI)

State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)

Meeting Minutes June 10, 2022 (virtual meeting)

Voting Members Present: Pamela Aasen, Ida Behreini, Vito DeSantis, Alice Eaddy, Ronda Jones-Williams, Clarke King, John O'Connell, Kathleen Spata, Evangelia Stone, Lauren Weishaar, Wanda Williford

Members Awaiting Appointment Present: Steven McCoy, Amanda Philp

Absent: Don Campbell, Pat McKenna, Gwen Orlowski, SETC Representative

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

CBVI Staff Present: Amanda Gerson, Napoleon Truesdale, Edward Szajdecki

Members of the Public Present: Elisa Cohen and Janna Sheiman DRNJ (reporting for Gwen Orlowski), Craig Ridgeway & Dena Hazen (ASL Interpreters), Joan Hervey (SSP), Heather Osowski, Jon Goodman, Liz Drennan, Dave Mostello

Lia Stone, SRC Chairperson, welcomed everyone; calling the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m.

Lia 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 the February 4, 2022, meeting were reviewed. A motion to accept the minutes was made by Wanda Williford and seconded by Alice Eaddy; all were in favor. These minutes will be placed into the permanent record of the SRC.

Remaining 2022 Meeting Dates: October 7 and December 9

Lia reminded members to introduce themselves prior to speaking each time.

Lia welcomed members of the public in, to listen to today's meeting; she reminded them that questions and/or comments are not permitted in this forum.

Lia welcomed Steven McKoy to his first meeting of the SRC. Steven introduced himself and noted that he will be representing Business & Industry as a member of the SRC. Steven has been working in journalism for 10 years. His mission and passion in life is to spread awareness around blindness and visual impairment; using his life experiences to create equal opportunity for people who are blind and/or visually impaired.

Jim Good is another recent SRC nominee; Jim is scheduled to attend the next SRC meeting, October 7.

Dr. Bernice Davis – Executive Director’s Report

Dr. Davis welcomed the newest SRC nominees, and thanked them for accepting the nomination to participate on the Council.

- Congress recently passed the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA), which had expired in 2020; the reauthorization will go into effect July, 2023, to strengthen the nation’s workforce development system. CBVI’s main focus is on the Rehabilitation Act. Some of the highlights include:
 - training of one million workers per year by 2028.
 - establishing a permanent Department of Labor (DOL) program to help individuals released from incarceration, to transition back to employment, and access to sustain a career path.
 - expanding the job program for youth.
 - employer and community college partnerships to provide high quality training.
 - strengthening industry and sector partnerships to better meet the needs of both employers and job seekers.
 - funding for innovative approaches to workforce development.
- Sarah Adelman’s nomination as the Department of Human Services (DHS) Commissioner was confirmed in March.
- CBVI has been working diligently, alongside the DHS, to ensure that accessibility is a priority. Whether it be certain processes, formats, or programs, the Commission always works to ensure accessibility to blind and/or vision impaired individuals. Dr. Davis noted that she was very happy to hear DHS is looking to bring on a vendor, for anyone that wishes to tap into making something either accessible or more accessible, they will have a resource readily available.
- DHS has developed a telework pilot program, which will allow certain departments/employees to work from home (up to 2 days per week). The program is set to begin June 13 and run for 1 year; ending June 30, 2023. Some departments, and job titles, are unable to participate due to their responsibilities. It has been made clear to all staff that no reduction in services will occur as a result of participation in this program. CBVI staff that provide direct services to consumers are only being approved for 1 telework day per week. In addition to providing a work life balance, this program was developed to hopefully improve the nationwide problem in hiring sufficient staff. Dr. Davis noted that CBVI is finding it very difficult to hire Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVIs), as well as Orientation & Mobility Specialists; recruitment is ongoing for several titles. The idea of developing a recruitment video is being discussed. Dr. Davis encouraged everyone that if they were aware of anyone looking for employment in these areas, to contact the Agency. More to come on the telework program as it moves forward.
- Moving along with plans for the Agency’s new case management system (InFormed). It is expected to take several months to get it up and running. Teams and implementation strategies have been put in place. The new system will allow the Agency to comply much more easily with reports that the Federal Government expects from the data.
- In celebration of Helen Keller Deaf-Blind Awareness Week (June 26-July 2), the Governor has signed a proclamation, which will be featured in a virtual program the Commission is organizing to raise awareness about deaf/blindness.
- Dr. Davis noted that she is the current President of the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB). This is a national organization made up of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies, who are dedicated to employing and increasing the independence of people who are blind and/or visually impaired. At NCSAB’s recently held conference, the Commission saw several, well deserved, trailblazer awards; program staff work very hard and do a great job!

Vito DeSantis asked about possible telework trends with regard to VR employment opportunities. He also commented on the opportunities telework could open up for individuals to work out of state. Dr. Davis noted that on a national level, several State VR directors are talking about a trend with regard to consumers who are interested in remote work. In general, people are interested in a balance that affords them some remote work. As a result of the pandemic, assistive technology has become huge; that comes along with people wanting to pursue alternative work schedules, or remote work as well. Another area that is being discussed nationally is apprenticeships; making sure people have the opportunity for mentorship with regard to skill sets and talents. Dr. Davis commented that CBVI does have a strong internship program, which the Agency is working to expand, in order to offer more opportunities.

Amanda Gerson, VR Coordinator- Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Update:

- InFormed (the new case management system) will give a lot more power in running reports; much more intuitive. The duplication of information will significantly decrease. The new system will make a positive impact on service provision; reducing some of the unnecessary work the counselors currently have to do in the system; this will significantly improve efficiency.
- VR is bringing on a number of new counselors to fill vacancies in each of the regional offices. Amanda reviewed the positions being filled in each of the offices.
- CBVI will celebrate Deaf Blind Awareness Week 2022, with a virtual program entitled "Diversity and Inclusion: Creativity and Innovation" on June 27 from 6 p.m. - 9 p.m. Featuring: The presentation of Governor Murphy's Helen Keller Deaf Blind Awareness Week Proclamation to the Deaf Blind Community Access Network of NJ; The announcement of the 2022 CBVI Board of Trustees Scholarship Awardees; and streaming of the American Masters Documentary, "Becoming Helen Keller".
- JKTC Updates: 1) The residential program is now a month back, with nine students; two students continue to attend as commuters. Commuting has always been an option; not all consumers want to live on site; at times they'll stay through dinner, and or for evening activities, and then go home mid evening. 2) Life 101, which is a summer transition program, will be hybrid this year. The first week will be entirely virtual and then 3-4 days of the second week will be on-site. 3) JKTC has a number of interns; welcoming a couple more. Looking forward to a socialwork intern in the fall and spring of the coming academic year. Also had an intern who completed their field assignment in Orientation & Mobility. 4) Air conditioning up and running; just in time for the season! 5) JKTC now has a looping system, which allows someone with hearing aids to directly tap into the amplification and doesn't require distribution of any special devices. In answering a question raised by Alice Eaddy, Amanda reported that JKTC was able to have a deaf blind consumer attend their program recently. An interpreter was assigned to the consumer. The consumer used tactical ASL exclusively; some modification was needed as that was something new to the Center. Overall, not a lot of changes to the actual curriculum, just in the way it was implemented. It was definitely a learning experience for staff. In order to expand awareness and make everyone feel comfortable, educational training was provided to JKTC staff, as well as for consumers in attendance; many of the consumers had never met a deaf blind person and didn't know how to communicate.
- One-Stop Career Center update: For the past 3-4 years the Commission has been attempting to work with the local one-stops. It has been a challenge, not only because of the pandemic, but also because CBVI is sometimes not understood by all of our partners as one of the required core workforce partners.

The Department of Labor (DOL) was recently able to get CBVI on the agenda for the Workforce Development Board of Directors meeting, and we are now in-line to have signed addendums for all 120 of the local areas, by July 1. Amanda noted that we are in the preliminary stages, and once the addendums are signed, the plan being worked out is to assign counselors to each local area, and they will be identified as the point of contact; lining up with the coverage area for that counselor's caseload. This will help facilitate referrals, as well as being able to connect consumers with the programs and services from our other workforce partners. Have also proposed to do reciprocal training with each of the local areas; to make sure they are fully aware of Commission services, the referral process, and blindness etiquette. Will also be working to ensure there is accessible technology at all of the local areas, so that if there was a program that one of our consumers wanted to participate in, they would have access to that. The one-stops probably have different needs, so will work individually with each of the areas to identify what the technology needs are, and create a solution to provide the appropriate equipment. Also looking forward to being able to be at that table; to work collaboratively on things like job hiring events, targeted hiring, and other opportunities in collaboration with our partners. John Tkacz offered the suggestion of possible station cubicles; a place the counselor could use and store adaptive equipment.

- Counselors are largely back in the field; some consumers continue to request virtual services; honoring those requests.
- Summer programs are on track. Work Skills Prep and College Prep are virtual this year. Wanted to offer either an in-person, or at least a hybrid option; however, there were challenges presented by the college regarding COVID. It was decided that the chance of individuals testing positive for COVID was too high for us to risk having to shut down the entire program. Understanding there is a lot of Zoom fatigue, as well as requests for in-person services, we are continuing to offer individual services for anyone who continues to need the support and doesn't want virtual services.
- A Request for Proposal (RFP) has been issued for the EDGE program. EDGE was created approximately 7 years ago, to serve 35 students; attendance has tripled in size since then. Given that the scope of the program has grown so much, along with the increase in contract amounts, it is our responsibility, as mandated by the State Treasury Department, to offer the opportunity to all vendors at this time. A bidder's conference was held; received some applications. Looking forward to making an announcement soon regarding the future recipient of this contract.
- Corrective Action Plan (CAP): One of the remaining findings is related to our cost allocation plan. We are waiting feedback from the federal government. We continue to advocate, as well as request assistance from the Department, to see what we can do to get that back. The other finding that remains outstanding has to do with our contract boilerplate language; we anticipate having that when we submit our quarterly update at the end of July. Also, hope to resolve our Memorandums Of Understanding (MOUs) by the end of July. We have cleared up everything with regard to VR services compliance and provision; it's the contractual type things that take a little bit longer to resolve, due to the multiple parties/agencies.
- Business Relations Unit (BRU) has been working with the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. CBVI was awarded to be part of a technical assistance project around progressive employment. Progressive employment is basically the idea that every consumer is ready for some sort of work experience, regardless of where they are in their VR journey; doing so engages them; keeps them active in the process and leads to better outcomes. We are getting some technical assistance, expanding our partnerships with our providers, to be able to offer more on progressive employment. Working now with three of our providers, one in each of the areas, who agreed to try this out, and we have a handful of consumers that we're developing opportunities for. Looking forward to continuing to grow; focusing on the southern half of the State now; looking to

replicate that as we move forward. Also looking to expand on-the-job training service to provide support and enticement for consumers and companies.

Deacon Truesdale, Business Enterprises NJ (BENJ):

Deacon provided background information on BENJ, which operates under the Randolph Shepard (RS) Act. The Act, created in 1936, gives legally blind US citizens priority to operate vending facilities on federal property. Additional requirements include, passing a federal background check and having a high school diploma, or equivalent. In New Jersey the RS Act has grown to expand upon state, county, and local municipalities. BENJ has a variety of locations; i.e. snack bars, cafeterias, micro markets, as well as 2 military facilities (Cape May Coast Guard and Fort Dix), and several US Post Office distribution centers. During the pandemic a lot of BENJ's entrepreneurs were out of work due to the shutdown. The military facilities and post offices were able to operate fully over the last few years. Everyone is happy to be returning to some normalcy. Changes have been made at several of the cafeterias, adding "Grab & Go" set-ups.

BENJ currently has 36 blind managers; 31 of them just returning to work in their facilities. The new telework program is already affecting businesses; there has been a decrease in revenue due to the reduction in workforce. BENJ is working to grow and expand the program; would like to move into private sectors; looking into opportunities aside from food services; new marketing ideas are being explored.

The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) is scheduled to complete a site visit of BENJ in August. They will be looking at best practices and also offering technical assistance.

In relaying national news, Deacon noted that in March there was a Government Accountability Office (GAO) protest in California, regarding a military facility and solicitation for a dining facility attendant. The Army is now using GAO recommendations, which will impact RS priority within these locations. A cooperative agreement needs to occur when it comes to contracts and programs within military facilities. A discussion ensued with SRC members. Everyone agreed there are a lot of scenarios being challenged, and a lot of work needs to be done to maintain priority within the various facilities.

Fiscal - Budget:

Ed Szajdecki, the Chief Fiscal Officer at the Commission, joined today's meeting to provide a bit of history surrounding CBVI's budget, as well as information on the current budget. Currently, both state and federal funds are approximately 31 million dollars per year; relying heavily on federal grants to operate. The bulk of the federal funds come from the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Grant, which is just under 13 million dollars. There hasn't been much of an increase in the VR Grant over the last 12 years. 20% of the funds go to the Commission; the bulk of it goes to the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS).

Mr. Szajdecki explained the re-allotment process that takes place annually; this allows states that anticipate not expending all their funds to return them; allowing funds to be redistributed among states that need extra funding. In the last 10 years CBVI has requested additional funds, ranging between 1-2 million dollars on an annual basis. CBVI has never been declined the requested funds, but it is never a guarantee. If the Commission is ever in a situation where it is known in advance that there will be a surplus of funds, the funds would be returned for other states to have that same opportunity.

The VR grant has a 15% Pre-employment Transition Service (Pre-ETS) annual cost requirement. The state is required to match the grant award, currently rounding to 21.6% annually. There are no other specific requirements on how those funds are spent. This year, 21.6% is about \$15 million towards the VR program. There is a maintenance of effort requirement, which means we need to match at least the equivalent amount two

years prior. In the last 10 years, several states have had problems with match, due to state budget and funding. If they are not able to match their VR grant, they have to return the amount they cannot match. CBVI has been able to match over the past few years, and monitor the maintenance of effort; cost can fluctuate.

The pandemic has reduced expenditures across the board, particularly in 2020. However, expenditures have been gradually increasing to pre pandemic levels. Inflation is also affecting goods and services. For the next two years it is forecasted that cost will be trending upward at a quicker rate than it has been in the past two years. This can affect the availability of funding.

CBVI is currently in good shape; cost has not increased since pre pandemic levels. Pre pandemic, with re-allotment dollars, we would have \$200,000 to \$300,000 surplus on a given year, which is very low when expenditures are close to \$15 to \$16 million. In addition, the federal government requires that we are not dependent on the re-allotment dollars for normal expenditures. The VR grant is half of our budget, which covers direct cost, services, goods, salaries, administrative cost, building, maintenance, utilities, Joseph Kohn Training Center, etc.

Prior to the pandemic the Commission was prepared for a worst-case scenario, which means planning out the next few years by introducing Order of Selection. This would be a last resort, when there is not enough money and making the decision on how to use the funds.

Amanda Gerson noted that the Agency must do fiscal forecasting to project whether or not there will be enough money to cover expenses and provide all the needed services. Amanda further explained that the Order of Selection is looked into as an option, when there is not enough money to provide the full scope of VR services to all eligible consumers. If this were to happen, a full plan would need to be created; a public hearing would be held; and there would be SRC involvement at that time. The consumers would be categorized by severity of disability. Changes would also be made in the case management system to track and record the severity of disability. Depending on fiscal projections, all categories could remain open with no wait list and everyone served normally. However, all categories could get closed. When this happens, an individual who newly applied for services would go through an application and eligibility process. At the point of eligibility determination, their VR counselor would place them in a category. If the category is not open, they would be placed on a waitlist. To continue to help consumers on their path to employment they would be referred to community partners and other providers in the workforce system. The final step would be to have the Order of Selection plan approved by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA).

Vito DeSantis asked what the likelihood is of VR going into an Order of Selection. Currently, this is not the case. Ed explained that Order of Selection is usually anticipated two years in advance; to put a plan in place. However, the expectation is that expenditures are going to rise at a higher level, due to inflation and increase in services. More information will be available within the next 12 months. Ed noted that unpredictable factors, such as inflation and COVID, are making it difficult to forecast the next few years, so the Agency has to be cautious and prepared to handle any worst-case scenarios. Amanda noted that the numbers are not back to pre-pandemic consumer involvement; consumer services were put on hold and some cases were closed during the pandemic. Some services haven't fully resumed because there are consumers who are still not comfortable and have challenges with remote learning. The numbers will also be affected by people who are new to the disability community as a result of COVID. Dr. Davis noted, pre-pandemic, 51% of VR agencies across the nation were in an Order of Selection. Some agencies had become dependent on the re-allocation money, which is not recommended. These agencies were forced to close a few, or all, categories depending on their fiscal profile. The federal government will not give additional money if an agency runs out; the agency would have to start prioritizing its services. There are various things that can impact agency expenditure, so it takes a lot of fiscal responsibility, projections, and adjustments.

Vito asked about informing the Governor's office of the negative impact of an Order of Selection. Lia commented that Order of Selection was discussed in the past, but to her knowledge nothing was sent to the Governor's office from the SRC; she commented that she was open to doing so.

Ed thanked the SRC members for their time during his summary of CBVI's budget process. He invited members to contact him with any questions they may have. Lia thanked Ed for his report.

SRC Member Reports

Each member was invited to share any updates/announcements they had with the group.

Members were reminded that updates (bullet format) are to be e-mailed to Christine Cooper prior to, or immediately following, each meeting and will be included in the meeting minutes. The following updates were received:

Lia Stone:

- EDGE students are doing great with employment, 90% of our 2.0 have secured summer employment
- Two of our EDGE students, Natasha I and Renae H won \$8000 scholarships from the National Federation of the Blind
- Discussed the possibility of building a partnership with Blind Institute of Technology and their apprenticeship programs with Pat, hopefully there will be more info to come.

Ronda Williams:

- Still looking for opportunities to reach out and connect with customers who have visual impairments. If anyone has any events, we can attend to help people apply for Access Link or help them understand new initiatives we have up and coming, please reach out to Ronda Williams rwilliams@njtransit.com.
- New Digital Res Form
- NJ Transit Employees are back working a hybrid schedule
- NJ Transit 2022 Accessibility Forum Invitation 6//14/2022

John Tkacz:

Once a year, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS) and the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) host public forums to provide information on available services for individuals with disabilities and receive input from the community. This year, you can choose to join virtually on either July 12 or July 21. The public forum registration is now open from June 1 to July 1. To attend these forums please click on the link below and register. The forums will be virtual so you must register to attend.

<https://www.nj.gov/labor/career-services/special-services/individuals-with-disabilities/2022publicforums.shtml>

Topics will include:

- Obtaining vocational services following a public health emergency
- Pros and cons of receiving virtual services
- Challenges of finding and keeping jobs during these difficult times
- Coordination and provision of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)
- Service provision to individuals who have high support needs

Vito DeSantis:

RSA report to congress on the VR program for Fiscal Year 2020; [Report on Federal Activities Under The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act \(WIOA\) for Fiscal Years 2017–2020](#)

Sub- Committees:

Membership is clearly needed on all of the SRC sub-committees. SRC members/nominees were asked to consider participation and contact Lia over the summer about participating.

Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment Committee: Vito agreed to take on the chairperson responsibilities of this committee. Lia thanked Vito and noted that additional members are needed; contact Vito in this regard.

Lia and Amanda explained the role of the Business Engagement Committee: Steven McCoy expressed an interest to be a member of this committee. A chairperson is still needed.

Quality Assurance Committee: Clarke King, Chairperson, noted no new updates. Remain in compliance with the 90-day eligibility and employment plan. Awaiting the next report.

SRC Annual Report Committee: Katie Donnellon offered to become the chairperson for this committee. Members are still needed. Vito noted his interest in participating. Lia to follow up with Pam and Ida.

Old/New Business

- Lia reviewed the SRC's 2022 goals and priorities. The SRC is working on apprenticeships. Anyone that has information on apprenticeship programs, was asked to forward the information to Lia. Working with VR services to encourage more relevant services around employment. Will add to the goals: Assist the Commission with outreach and networking to recruit for CBVI positions that are hard to recruit.
- The possibility of an in-person SRC meeting on October 7 at the Joseph Kohn Training Center (JKTC) was suggested. Pre-pandemic, SRC meetings were held in the downstairs conference room. There are 2 adjoining rooms there, so participants can clearly spread out. If there are objections to meeting in-person, or any other circumstances arise, the meeting will remain virtual.
- Alice Eaddy, John O'Connell, Lia Stone, Lauren Weishaar, and Wanda Williford all received appointment letters from the Governor.
- Nominees for SRC Chairperson/Vice-Chairperson: Nominations received for Vito DeSantis and Kathleen Spata, so far. Members were encouraged to continue to send nominations to Lia. Election plans to be discussed further at the October meeting; elections will be held on December 9. All nominees are asked to share a brief summary of interest, along with their resume, to the voting members of the SRC, between October 8 and November 25.

Announcements

Joseph J. Ruffalo Jr. passed away on May 3. Joe was the president of the National Federation of the Blind of NJ for 27 years. Lia expressed that he was a phenomenal advocate and a wonderful mentor; he will be missed.

Adjournment

Lia thanked everyone for attending today's meeting, and wished everyone a great summer.

Vito DeSantis made a motion to adjourn the meeting; Lauren Weishaar seconded the motion; all were in favor. The meeting was adjourned at 12:10pm.

The next SRC meeting is scheduled for October 7, 2022.

Respectfully Submitted,

Christine Cooper

Christine Cooper

CBVI – Administrative Assistant