

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

Meeting Minutes – December 3, 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 Present: Bill Freeman, Gwen Orłowski, Amanda Philp, Lauren Weishaar, Ronda Williams, Wanda Williford

Absent: Don Campbell, Amanda Gerson, Sheryl Hutchison, John O’Connell

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

Staff/Members of Public Present: Selina Gooden, 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 the October 1, 2021 meeting were reviewed. A motion to accept the minutes was made by Vito DeSantis and seconded by William Robinson; all were in favor. These meeting minutes will be put into the permanent record of the SRC.

2022 Meeting Dates: February 4, June 10, October 7, and December 9

Dr. Bernice Davis – Executive Director’s Report

- As of November 8 staff have been back in the office full-time. Since August 2020, staff have been in the field, providing face-to-face services, and service delivery was increased gradually. There are some consumers that have requested remote services; this is respected and some remote services continue to be delivered.
- 2020 and 2021 has demonstrated how virtual services can be provided at a high level; feedback has been very positive. Peer counselors have been a great example of what can be accomplished virtually. Also received some feedback that indicate virtual services are not for everyone, and we certainly recognize that and are addressing that population also. Very proud of the CBVI staff; we've been able to deliver services either way, at the consumers' request. Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVIs) transition services have been going extremely well; all of the students are back at school; there are some schools that prefer virtual services, but most of the schools have their COVID protocols in place, and we abide by them.

- JKTC is actively providing a commuter program; not sure when we'll get back to residential services. Staff were very innovative with the virtual program as well.
- CBVI's Management Information Systems (MIS) has been very busy; getting ready to experience a huge transition, an upgrade of our case management system (Informed). All the approvals have finally gone through. Phase I in getting the new system started will begin in January. Informed will help to meet expectations, and required reports, for the Federal Government, as well as assist us with interfacing with Medicaid. Looking forward to the new system.
- Dr. Davis extended appreciation to CBVI's stakeholders who've been very patient and informative in providing feedback, which is needed to improve services.
- CBVI's Social Workers have been a great help to our Vocational program, especially during the pandemic. There are a lot of various issues that impact work readiness and our social workers have been essential in helping consumers address other issues that impact their VR goals.
- There are a few Education vacancies; we are having a bit of a hard time filling; TVIs are very hard to come by. A special thank you to the current staff, they have taken on quite a bit of extra work due to the lack of staff. Vito DeSantis asked whether or not the College of NJ still has a TVI program. Dr. Davis confirmed that they do, and Kathleen Spata offered to check with Dr. Petrov, Chair of the program, on the current status.
- Dr. Davis reported that she is currently serving as President Elect for the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB). NCSAB has a conference scheduled for December 6-10. Dr. Michelle Whitmore will be presenting on a quality assurance tool for evaluating CBVI's VR Program; it's been well received by staff and we've received lots of feedback; it is data driven, and we've seen improvements in regard to eligibility, meeting our deadlines within VR. At the request of Mr. DeSantis, Dr. Whitmore will be scheduled to also present to the SRC at a future date.
- Very excited about CBVI's internship program; thankful to have interns; have received a lot of positive feedback, particularly for VR.
- Dr. Davis also shared that she had the pleasure of presenting at the 45th National Federation of the Blind (NFB) State convention that was held in early November; it was great; shared a lot of updates; looking forward to working with CBVI's partners.
- Thank you to CBVI's managers, they have been very active with the Commission's Customer Advisory Boards (CAB); not only getting information from consumers, but coming up with innovative ways to address and satisfy ideas/concerns/gaps.

Pat McKenna, Assistant Division Director - Vocational Rehabilitation Update:

- The Business Relations Unit (BRU) recently conducted a series of virtual employment cafes. These were a series of Zoom sessions, each one hour in length, where consumers and their counselors had the opportunity to engage with different potential employers; it was a very successful program. The next series will be scheduled for some time in the Spring.

- Business Enterprises of NJ (BENJ) continues to steadily improve and get back to business; various locations continue to reopen; on-the-job training is again available. A few locations have just gone out for bid; what that means is, there are a few new locations that are available for bench managers to operate.
- JKTC: 1) The installation of the new looping system in the conference room has been completed. 2) Over the next few weeks there will be 2 new Orientation & Mobility instructors on staff. 3) Safety related protocols and procedures have been updated, including student handbook, staff handbook, and the exit interview process. 4) COVID protocols are adhered to, and reviewed with staff and clients, including things such as daily symptom checking, masking, hand sanitizing, etc. 5) On November 9 in-person programming resumed with a limited number of students; the number of consumers in the program will progressively increase. Also offering a virtual programming option for those students that prefer a remote program at this time. In-person commuter and virtual programming is offered concurrently and in an integrated fashion, so that the students all have the opportunity to engage with one another. Working towards a goal of resuming residential programming; no date at this time. There is a lot of interest for the residential programming model to resume, and we look forward to making that available once we can. 6) Working on plans for a virtual open house at JKTC for February; basically, it will be a one-hour Zoom information session about the program for individuals who are interested; information will go out as soon as it is finalized; it will be an opportunity to log on and talk with some of the staff, and have some of their questions about the program answered. Will also be doing something similar, as it pertains to Business Enterprises and a few other areas.
- One-stop career centers are still primarily providing their services virtually; however, they are slowly beginning to open back up; they are open for career services in-person by appointment only.
- The Corrective Action Plan (CAP): we continue to make progress; continue to keep our quality assurance measures in place to maintain compliance. Some of the RSA issues pertaining to supported documentation and 60-day eligibility have been resolved, we continue to work on policies and procedures concerning our internal control measures. We had a successful technology assistance meeting with RSA in October 25 and they gave us some great guidance and information on what they would like to see for internal control measures, moving forward.

In answer to a question raised by Clarke King regarding the geographic distribution of the commuter students in the JKTC program, Pat noted that the staff at JKTC reaches out to interested consumers to find out if they prefer the commuter/virtual model, or if they would like to wait for a date, to be determined, for residential programming. Clarke commented that he was just wondering if consideration was ever given, or could be given, to set up small training centers in different locations throughout the State. Pat commented that satellite training centers is an interesting idea and he'd be happy to discuss it more at a later point; hoping to go back to full residential programming as soon as the pandemic subsides. Vito noted that staffing and

location issues presented a problem in the distant past, when the idea of satellite training centers was discussed; however, doesn't mean it shouldn't be evaluated again.

Vito asked about a study that was completed a few years back when CBVI staff visited a few VR training centers around the country to look at how their operations were run, and what could be learned from them. Dr. Davis commented that CBVI also had consultants come in to take a look at CBVI's vision and data, and also speak with the staff and some consumers about how we could improve things; this was also a part of that study. Pat commented that the report and data is fantastic, and was very much some of the foundation he's been using to make a few updates and modifications since coming on-board at CBVI. Vito commented that he didn't do the study for CBVI's training center, but has conducted that study in other states, so he was curious and glad to hear it's being looked at and implemented. Vito noted the misconception among a lot of people that training centers are simply an independent living program where only basic skills are taught; it is important that the VR mission is aligned with the training center so everyone is on the same page.

Dr. Davis encouraged SRC members to relay to her or Pat any issues they hear of from their constituents.

Alice Eaddy asked about plans for EDGE. Pat noted that in the absence of Amanda Gerson today, this will be put on the February 4 meeting agenda.

Introductions from the newest members of the SRC:

The following members were welcomed to today's meeting.

Gwen Orłowski is replacing Charles Ouslander as the SRC's **Client Assistance Program Representative**. Ms. Orłowski is the Executive Director for Disability Rights NJ (DRNJ). She reviewed DRNJ's current priorities:

- Actively engaged in a hiring process, not just for the employment team and Corrective Action Plan (CAP) work, but across the Agency.
- Ensuring that VR agencies have reasonable fee schedules related to college tuition and graduate school tuition; working very closely with the National Disability Rights Network, who is working closely with RSA around this issue. Would welcome the opportunity to talk to CBVI more about DRNJ's analysis of this issue and ways to work together on this issue.
- Organization of a children and youth team, to help children move from the children system of care into the DDD system. Priority issue for the coming year is going to be around transition issues for children and youth in foster care, as well as historically underserved and under-represented youth.

As DRNJ finishes up the year and heads into 2022, the focus is on a holistic approach to the special education piece, the VR piece, and helping children and families plan for transition, so people have a coordinated vision of what transition from childhood into adulthood will look

like, and what their legal rights are regarding all those systems that are so complicated to navigate. DRNJ believes in partnering with state agencies, and they are excited and hopeful to bring meaningful change in the way that legal services are delivered, especially to those at risk, youth, from underrepresented populations.

Lauren Weishaar is a new member to the SRC, representing a **Community Rehabilitation Program Provider**. Ms. Weishaar is a Manager for Career Pathway Connections, Easterseals, NJ. She explained that this program provides opportunities for individuals with hearing loss, and vision loss, to enter the workforce and obtain sustainable employment. She outlined the work done to assist clients in determining their career path, and preparing for employment. Career Pathway Connections works with both the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and CBVI. Services are provided to clients throughout the State and include:

- job readiness training
- job placement
- job coaching
- assistive technology demonstrations.

Amanda Philp will be replacing Bill Freeman as a **State Education Agency representative** to the SRC. Ms. Philp recently started her appointment at the Department of Education, working in the Office of Special Education as an Education & Program Development Specialist, Autism Specialist. She is getting acclimated to this position, and is looking forward to being part of the State Rehabilitation Council.

Bill Freeman thanked everyone for working together with him during his membership on the Council. He is excited to continue his work with Amanda and CBVI on pre-employment transition services, as well as other initiatives. Lia and Dr. Davis extended their appreciation to Bill for all his efforts and contributions as an SRC member; his work was very much appreciated.

SRC Members' Reports

Members were reminded that updates (in 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:

Kathleen Spata (Community Rehabilitation Program Provider):

- YES will be continuing with a Virtual model after a successful pilot program this past Spring. Staff is connecting WSP alumni and continuing to be an additional layer of support as consumers continue working toward goals of employment. Staff has been able to reconnect with WSP alumni, help them stay on track (or get back on the track), and

provide opportunities for them to connect with one another in a safe and supportive (virtual) environment. YES staff continue to work with the VRCs and Amanda Gerson as we prepare for our next Virtual YES Program.

- Regarding summer programs, Work Skills Preparation and College Preparation Programs, we are hopeful for an in-person program or at least a hybrid program of both virtual and in-person components for this coming summer. The CBVI Transition Counselors have been referring the students to attend the Open House in February. By that time, there will be more information regarding the logistics and what format we will be able to safely offer to the high school students.
- SSP-NJ has been actively providing in-person and virtual services. All requests for services are on a case-by-case basis, however, we have successfully facilitated support services to consumers in their home and their communities. Currently, we have 27 consumers (29%) who've opted into in-person services with 19 SSPs providing the services. There have been issues regarding accessibility in terms of consumers completing the CBVI Health Screening tool; however, SSP-NJ is working closely with CBVI staff to find accommodations to facilitate this part of the process. SSP-NJ is looking forward to hosting training of new SSPs in the coming year to meet the needs of the consumers we serve.

Ronda Williams (Business & Industry Representative):

- We are still looking for opportunities to reach out and connect with our customers who have visual impairments. If anyone have any events we can attend to help people apply for Access Link or help them understand new initiatives e have up and coming please reach out to Ronda Williams rwilliams@njtransit.com.
- Employees have returned back into the work place effective, Monday November 15
- We are aware customers in Northern New Jersey are currently experiencing significant delays- We have been working on solutions with our service providers to restore service reliability that our Access Link Customers expect and deserve.
- Region 5 & 6 service delivery have also impacted our call center resulting in higher call volumes and longer hold times. NJ Transit Access Link have taken action to improve the customer experience.

William Robinson (Business & Industry Representative):

Mr. Robinson explained some of the issues with regard to getting back to work:

- price increases
- supply chain issues
- hiring difficulties
- rest stop issues

Sub-Committee Reports:

- The need to form an ad hoc committee for the 2023 Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) was discussed at the last meeting. Members are needed to assist Amanda in this area. If CBVI is partnering with Mississippi State, and not ICI, this time around, Vito DeSantis offered to chair this sub-committee; he would not want to pose a conflict of interest. Jonathan Goodman and Katie Donnellon both offered to assist also.

Vito made a motion to form the 2023 CSNA sub-committee; Alice Eaddy seconded the motion; all were in favor. Lia encouraged additional volunteers to e-mail herself or Amanda directly.

- Business Engagement Committee: Jonathan Goodman, Chairperson, noted nothing new to report.
- Policy and Procedure Committee: Ida Behreini offered to chair this committee. Vito offered to assist.
- Quality Assurance Committee: Clarke King, Chairperson, reported that he recently received a 60/90-day eligibility report from Dr. Whitmore, and happy to report both were over 90% compliance. The reports were very comprehensive, data driven. Anyone interested in helping out on this committee was encouraged to contact Clarke.
- SRC Annual Report Committee: Pat reported that work continues on finalizing this year's success stories. The Report is on schedule to be completed by the end of the month. This committee is also in need of a chairperson and additional members; Anyone interested was asked to contact Amanda.
- By-Laws (ad hoc) Committee: Vito thanked Alice and Jonathan for their work on the SRC By-Laws. He recapped the process that took place so far; first draft to SRC members, with both the Commission and Department review. At this time, with no questions or comments heard, Vito made a motion for the members to adopt the By-Laws as distributed; Alice seconded the motion. All were in favor to adopt the SRC By-Laws.

Old/New Business

SRC Goals and Priorities: Each year the SRC establishes what they want to focus on in the coming year. After much discussion, a motion was made by Vito DeSantis, and seconded by Pamela Aasen, to adopt the following goals, and to work with CBVI on:

- enhancement of competitive integrated employment outcomes.
- the return back to full in-person services.
- greater interface with the local one-stop centers.
- opportunities for consumers to enter apprenticeship programs.
- increasing VR services (for consumers between the ages of 25-54).

Pat noted that there has been no word on any of the SRC appointments.

Adjournment

Jonathan Goodman made a motion to adjourn the meeting; the motion was seconded by Kathleen Spata; 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 safe and healthy holiday season. She commented that she looks forward to seeing everyone in the new year.

The next SRC meeting is scheduled February 4, 2022.

Respectfully Submitted,

Christine Cooper

Christine Cooper

CBVI – Administrative Assistant