

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

Meeting Minutes – February 7, 2020

Joseph Kohn Training Center - 130 Livingston Avenue - New Brunswick, NJ

**Voting Members Present:** Pamela Aasen, Ida Behreini, Alice Eaddy, Rick Fox, Bill Freeman, Jonathan Goodman, Clarke King, Pat McKenna, Charles Ouslander, William Robinson, Kathleen Spata, Kris Tucker, John Tkacz

**Present (pending appointment):** Vito DeSantis

**Absent:** Gary Altman, Jennifer Armstrong-Ekelmann, Evangelia Stone

**Ex Officio Present:** Bernice Davis

**Staff/Members of Public Present:** Krystal Allen, Michelle Whitmore

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The meeting was called to order at 9:30 a.m. by Rick Fox, Chairperson. Rick announced that this 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.

Rick welcomed today's guest speakers from CBVI – Krystal Allen and Michelle Whitmore. He also welcomed Charles Ouslander and all the SRC members.

**Approval of Meeting Minutes**

The meeting minutes of December 6, 2019, were reviewed. There were no amendments, corrections, or additions recommended. Rick noted that he would abstain from voting since he was not at that meeting. A motion was made by Alice Eaddy, and seconded by William Robinson to accept the minutes; all were in favor. The December 6, 2019, meeting minutes will be put into the permanent record of the SRC.

**Krystal Allen, CBVI Community Outreach Specialist:**

Krystal shared that she has been working at the Commission since last summer. Prior to working at CBVI she was a consumer; she has been legally blind since age 16. Krystal handed out information material that is currently included in a community outreach kit, outlining the Commission's services. Members were encouraged to review and share with people they connect with in the community. Krystal explained that all the information, although it is printed, is also accessible on the CBVI website. She reported that she has visited the local health departments and libraries to share this information. Her first visit was with the Bloomfield Health Department, and then extended from there. She noted that there was an

overwhelming interest in what the Commission does and how it supports NJ communities. Krystal reported that in the month of December she packaged 87 community outreach kits that went to various agencies, libraries, and health departments in all 21 counties. By the end of January there were 29 responses; very interested in having CBVI staff do service training for their staff; let them know about the referral process, as well as community outreach events. Krystal also reported that she had the opportunity to package over 500 information packets for Tammy Murphy's, family festival held in Jersey City. For the second phase of the community outreach effort, Krystal will be connecting with different hospitals, low vision specialists, and other facilities that relate to health and community development. Moving forward from outreach phases, Krystal explained that she'll be participating with the College Prep Seminar and SHARP, as well as helping with CBVI's 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary resource fair. In a couple of weeks she'll be doing her first in-service training with CBVI Staff Development at the Morris County Office of Aging to a staff of social workers and their community outreach coordinators to inform them on sensitivity, CBVI's services, and things that support people who are adjusting to vision loss. Krystal noted that she is very excited about what's to come and how she can expand on her responsibilities.

Vito DeSantis thanked Krystal for her presentation. He asked if there has been any thought or possibility of combining outreach efforts with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS), for those individuals who might have multiple disabilities, outside of the realm of what CBVI does. Bernice noted that one of the things CBVI has been looking to do is work with DVRS on the one-stops, which are in each and every county; making sure that we are not only delivering training to the one-stops; there was a period of time where we offered training and assistance with assistive technology. In regard to those with the most significant disabilities, that's something the Commission is working on in terms of not only the combined State Plan, but there's also task forces coming up in relation to maximizing employment for persons with disabilities, significant disabilities. The federal government has given special attention/funding to the VR agencies in order to support increased employment for those with significant disabilities. Not only does CBVI and DVRS need all the help we can get, but nationally we've seen a lot of the VR agencies across the country are really struggling with maximizing that particular program around supported employment. John Tkacz, who is with DVRS, asked if there's any connection with the Centers for Independent Living. He noted that some folks really aren't ready for DVRS, or maybe portions of CBVI. In the past they used to obtain equipment, but since technology has evolved, more computerized, it's his understanding that it's gone by the waste-side and people are often just referred to CBVI. Krystal commented that is going to be a part of the second phase of community outreach efforts, introductions with places such as the Centers for Independent Living, and others, so that more of these facilities and institutions are able to learn about CBVI services. Vito provided a historical reference – the Centers of Independent Living used to be under the auspices of the Office of Special Education, Department of Education; they are no longer in the Department of Education; that whole funding system has been changed; they are now in Health and Human Services, so maintaining that relationship with them makes it a little more challenging. Vito asked Krystal if she's had any conversations with the disabled veteran's community. Krystal noted she had not had any

formal contact, but did send information to the VA Hospital in East Orange and the VA Rehabilitation site to the Lion's in NJ. She asked Vito to send her any contact information he may have, so she can get in touch with others. Rick commended Krystal, and Bernice, for the efforts in reaching out to the hospitals; it's really good if we can get some understanding to filter down to some of the staff there. Rick also offered the assistance of the NFB of NJ with inservicing. Rick encouraged other SRC members to distribute CBVI postcards/information when visiting appropriate offices/facilities in their communities. Alice asked for an extra packet, and wanted to know if information about deaf/blind people is included; Krystal noted that information is in the general brochure. Krystal also gave everyone her contact information (# 973-648-4497). She offered for anyone wanting extra material to contact her. Also, if anyone is having any community outreach events and the Commission's information is needed, to feel free to call her. Rick thanked Krystal for her presentation, and commented that she is a wonderful addition and great asset to the Commission.

**Michelle Whitmore, CBVI Quality Assurance Coordinator (QAC):**

Michelle noted that she has been with CBVI for three weeks now. She shared her education and work history. She has a BA in Psychology; minor in public health; Master's in Business Administration; and almost finished with her Doctorate in Business Administration with a specialty in Leadership. In 1999 she started working for NJ Association of Deaf Blind. Moved on to NY Memorial Sloan Cancer Center as an administrator for a few years. Came back to NJ and worked for Mental Health as well as with the Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) in the Department of Human Services (DHS). In 2008 went to DDD as a case manager. In 2012 became a supervisor, and ultimately Director, for the Olmstead Unit; they transitioned people from institutional settings to less restrictive environments in the community. After that she became the Assistant Chief Executive Officer (ACEO) at Vineland Developmental Center, and then ACEO at Hunterdon Developmental Center. In 2017 she transitioned back to DDD central office to become a Special Assistant to the Assistant Commissioner. She commented that she decided she wanted a change, so she applied for the QAC position here at CBVI, and is very happy to be here. As far as her work here at CBVI, under the direction of Dr. Davis, she explained that she'll be engaged in program and facility evaluations, including various aspects of clinical support and administrative services, and completing other related duties as assigned. She will be coordinating efforts with staff to ensure the Commission is in compliance with state and federal regulations, and obtain a successful resolution to the findings from the RSA 2018 federal monitoring report. Michelle noted that she is looking to foster a collaborative effort amongst everyone at CBVI in the areas of quality assurance to maintain the desired level of quality service or product by means of giving special attention to every stage of the process of delivery or production. She explained that the current goal is to continue to ensure we remain in compliance with all policies and regulations, to strengthen services, and to capitalize on areas of improvement and opportunities, not only for the people we serve, but also for staff who do the important work day in/day out.

Vito suggested looking into The Technical Assistance Center for Program Evaluation and Quality Assurance (PEQA), which offers trainings, webinars, etc.. Bernice noted that CBVI's Program Improvement Specialist, Kevin Harris, has gone to several of their conferences and is currently doing a cornerstone study with PEQA. Michelle is scheduled to speak with Kevin, as well as other staff. She is also becoming more familiar with WINTAC; this is another technical assistance center that has been approved and funded by RSA. Vito, who is on the WINTAC team, offered to put Michelle in contact with them.

Bernice commented that she is excited to have Michelle in this role. She explained that the Commission had a QAC, approximately 6 or 7 years ago, and when that person retired the vacancy was never filled. Michelle's first priority will be looking to make sure we are in compliance with all state and federal regulations, and for those things that need enhancement she'll be there to help. Bernice also noted that we used to have more emphasis behind our community outreach and that's something that fizzled a bit; she is thrilled to have Krystal on staff to bring a new fire and vibrancy to community outreach.

Rick thanked Michelle for her presentation and noted that he has a few ideas he'd like to discuss with her some time. He commented that now that we have a QA Specialist the SRC should know that the line of communication is open should any stakeholder feel there's a need for improvement.

### **Dr. Bernice Davis – VR & Executive Director's Report:**

- Training: Would like staff to continue to focus on enhancing service delivery/customer service. Would like to put together a supervisory track. There are times when people come with innate abilities in terms of being a supervisor, but Bernice noted that she also believe it's a continuous learning experience. She asked Staff Development to work with Human Resources in coming up with trainings around customer service, as well as time management, mental health, and substance abuse.
- 3 social workers now working at CBVI. 1 at JKTC; 1 in the northern region; 1 in the southern. Building a very strong social work internship. Through the data seen thus far, Bernice noted that this has helped VR and IL counselors. For instance, when we have consumers who can't really focus on the primary goal of work because they are worried about where they are going to eat; where are they going to sleep. Very happy to see our social workers are a big support, so our counselors can focus on their primary job of counseling people, to get ready for work and get those competitive integrated jobs.
- Been doing a lot of work regarding federal regulations: 1) SRC report was submitted in December, 2019; 2) Also submitted the Commission's Corrective Action Plan last month to RSA 3) Currently working with DVRS on our Combined State Plan. The Combined State Plan is a strategic plan around increasing integrative and competitive employment for person with disabilities. CBVI has already submitted its section of the Plan to DVRS; they are currently reviewing it and we'll have discussion/questions. RSA

is very much interested and mandated that CBVI, as well as DVRS, work much more closely together in partnership. Bernice reported she has spoken with the new Director at DVRS, Karen Carroll; fruitful conversation; looking forward to a lot of great work together.

- New Commissioner at RSA is Mark Schultz. Very happy with a lot of the new initiatives he has put out. One is to enhance communication with the VR agencies. Historically, RSA has been available for questions about regulations; however, he is being proactive in making sure there are meetings and phone calls; very engaging. Looking forward to more regular interface. RSA starting research in regard to enhancing relationships with employers; data gathering on what employers need, priorities, in order to boost the business engagement initiative across the country. For those of you who don't know, the business engagement, a federally mandated initiative, CBVI's is called the Business Relations Unit (BRU). The BRU works day in/out to make connections with employers; connections have been made with a few very large companies. RSA is also resuming and ramping up their desk audits on the Randolph Sheppard (RS) program; they will be doing desk audits across the nation, as well as face-to-face audits. There are some things that we are looking at in terms of our RS program, and looking for some technical assistance around that, as well as assessment of how we could enhance the program. Looking forward to RSA audit. RSA was basically happy with our service delivery in the 2018 audit; however, some protocols need to be updated. Looking to resume our policy and procedure committee. RSA has been doing a series where seasoned VR counselors are doing a conference call with various agenda items. VR counselors are allowed not only to receive information, but also ask questions of each other, as well as RSA. Bernice noted that she spoke to a couple of our seasoned VR counselors a few days ago and they said the first couple of sessions were pretty much beginner types of things, but they said as the series has moved forward, they are more engaged and find it more and more helpful.

### **Sub-committees:**

Members discussed the revamping of the SRC's sub-committees. The chairperson of each committee will be responsible for contacting members, organizing the format, and directing the work of their respective committee. Meetings can be held via teleconference or face-to-face (reserving this room following an SRC meeting is an option). Rick asked that each chairperson keep him updated on the progress of their committee.

At this meeting the following members offered their assistance:

Policy & Procedure: Pat agreed to continue chairing this committee to review VR policies. Ida offered to be on this committee also.

Business Relations: Jonathan agreed to chair. Ida, Vito, Clarke, and Will offered to be on this committee also.

Quality Assurance: This newly formed committee would communicate with Michelle Whitmore, CBVI's new QAC, providing the SRC's input to VR quality assurance issues that might come up from stakeholders. Kris Tucker offered to chair this committee. Rick, Kathleen, Pam, John, and Clarke offered their assistance as well.

### **Announcements/Comments/Old or New Business:**

Bernice reminded everyone to please say their name before speaking during the SRC meetings; she thanked those that do. This is very helpful in transcribing the meeting minutes.

Ida Behreini noted that CBVI will always have a friend in her at JP Morgan. She explained that the Commission helped her get that job through an event sponsored by JP Morgan; she is trying to continue that program; it was a big success in terms of retaining diverse disabled talent, not only in the blind community, but in other physically disabled communities around the country. Ida explained that another reason she has become successful at her job is that they have a low vision working group at JP Morgan, and also an accessibility group; they have dedicated college clubs for all sorts of things; they have leadership development groups. She noted that it's been so impactful, not only for the disability community, but for various minority communities as well. Starting to do more meaningful relationships with companies like Lowe's, Amazon, etc.; a cross collaboration in making sure that these companies know what's working for other stakeholders in having their disabled or low vision people come together if they choose to, in a safe space, to talk about ways to develop and achieve success. Ida suggested that the Commission could help foster that with other companies.

With regard to community outreach initiatives, and the intent to bring in more people who need services from the Commission, Ida asked if there are plans for the Commission to hire additional counselors. Bernice noted that the Commission is already addressing this area; bringing on several vocational assistants (primary job to support the VR unit); the Commission now has more assistants than ever before. Hopefully, the supervisory training that is taking place will also be helpful and provide additional support. Working on a portal for forms and regulations. Bernice noted that an assessment of counselors has been taking place also; looking at the successful counselors - what they are doing and how they manage their caseloads.

Looking at what skill sets, training, and supports to give the VR counselors besides just adding more people. Want to make sure we are supporting the staff we have as much as we can. Bernice noted that she would also like to see a portal developed where we highlight staff that are doing well, or post some of the thank-you letters received from consumers; it's important to highlight staff doing good things.

Bill Freeman thanked everyone at CBVI for the work done so far with the inter-agency agreement (Department of Education/CBVI/DVRS), and noted that he looks forward to engaging in the work on pre-employment transition services for students. He explained that

there are several different pieces of that inter-agency agreement that involve a combination of things, like reaching out to school staff and parents to let them know about pre-employment transition services, to coordinate the training materials used for the outreach, and there will be a lot more information sharing.

Recommendations for upcoming SRC meeting presentations:

- VR Counselor, Supervisor, and Deaf Blind Specialist. Bernice suggested they may want to have Joy Atin-Shark also; she is a supervisor of the Deaf Blind Unit.
- VR Counselor that specializes in transition, and then an Education presentation
- VR college counselor
- Randolph Sheppard supervisor and a vendor
- Home/mobility instructor – how it relates to employment issues

Krystal asked SRC members to share with their constituents an opportunity currently being offered by CBVI for college students in NJ who are visually impaired. The scholarships will be awarded at the Trenton Thunder game this summer. Details posted on CBVI's website.

Bernice shared the following:

- 2020 is the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of CBVI. Plans are being discussed to hold an event in October to celebrate this milestone. Will share information on this as it becomes available.
- CBVI is putting together a college prep forum to be held on April 25 at the Middlesex Fire Academy; target audience: parents of transition students as well as 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> yr college students. Currently the format is to have a few guest speakers as well as two round tables; one for students; one for parents; and also to have assistive technology resource tables. More information to follow on this event too.
- VR in RSA put forth a mechanism called the State Wage Interchange System; will help VR agencies get data from consumers who are working outside of NJ. Labor signed on; CBVI also looking to sign on to that agreement so we receive information as well.

Rick announced that the organization he represents is going to have their Washington seminar this weekend. They have 3 bills, pieces of national legislation, they will be advocating and educating Congress on. Rick offered to send everyone a link to the fact sheets concerning these pieces of legislation. They involve trying to make home appliances, fitness equipment, and professional fitness equipment accessible. They also involve setting accessibility standards for college platforms and software that colleges use, so colleges would know how to implement accessibility. Also involves the possibility of a refundable tax credit for out of pocket assistive technology expenses.

John provided an update on leadership within DVRS. Karen Carroll has been selected as the new Director. Sherri Thompson is the new Assistant Director for administrative services.

They will be selecting 2 additional chiefs (field and program). Rick requested that John provide him with contact information for the Chairperson of the SRC for DVRS; he'd like to attend an upcoming meeting.

Pam shared that she missed the December meeting in order to accompany her children, both of whom are CBVI service recipients, who were participating in the Paralympic National Para-Swim Championship in Texas. They did very well in the competition; they are each double national champions now (2 events each); each hold 2 American records. Everyone applauded and offered their congratulations on their success.

### **Adjournment**

Rick thanked everyone for attending today's meeting, and for their active participation.

Kris Tucker made a motion to adjourn the meeting; the motion was seconded by Jonathan Goodman; all were in favor. The meeting was adjourned at 12:00 p.m.

The next SRC meeting is scheduled for April 3, 2020. Remaining schedule: June 5, October 2, and December 4.

Respectfully Submitted,

Christine Cooper  
CBVI – Administrative Assistant